Paradigm Shift

Linda Stoops & Andrea Brown

An X-Files/Forever Knight Novel

Paradigm Shift

An X-Files/Forever Knight crossover
by
Linda Stoops & Andrea Brown

STAFF
Editor: TM Alexander
Layout: PJ Alexander
Cover: PJ Alexander

PRICE
US : $15.00

DISTRIBUTOR
Agent with Style
9821 Hawkins Creamery Rd
Damascus, MD 20872-2339
www.agentwithstyle.com
Zines@agentwithstyle.com

Paradigm Shift Copyright©May,2001. Otter Limits Press. All rights revert to authors and artist at time of publication. No part or parts of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from said authors and artist.
This is a fannish parody and is not intended to infringe upon existing copyrights.

That's The Bite...

We've had this submission for quite a while. It was supposed to appear in the now-defunct Mulder's Spooktown Café. But even then, I thought it was worthy of being a novel. And here it is exactly that.

Linda and Andrea have a wonderful way with words and their love for both fandoms is extremely apparent in this intricate, intelligently woven story. Their talent to take one single line from one single episode of The X-Files and turn it into such a fantastic piece of work is to be admired.

What I love most about this piece is the loyalty of the people Dana has found herself recently surrounded by through Mulder. Their ceaseless efforts to assist her in this period of darkness. All this and a case as well! Add to that the wonderful characterizations, the Mulder-brand of humor, and the authors' articulate style and I couldn't put this down!

I am saddest that I was not able to get any illustrations done, but between overtime at work, lack of reference material to do the FK folks justice and recent ill health it became impossible. Actually, it would have simply been gilding an already beautiful lily.

I leave you to read now. I believe this story will satisfy the cravings of the fans of both these shows. And you Scully fans? She's sexy enough, but OH! What an awesome creature of the night she presents. Woo!

Linda and Andrea? Thank you for the very kind patience you showed while we worked at getting this to print. And thank you for one intense and entertaining read.

PJ & TM Alexander

Paradigm Shift

Scully: All right, how do I die?
Bruckman: (After long silent staredown): You don't.
---From "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose"

Alexandria, Virginia—June 14, 1996

The first thing Dana Scully became aware of was that she was lying down; the second, that she wasn't at home. The couch under her felt cold and slick like leather, some of the springs were broken, and the last thing she recalled was being on duty. Casting back in her mind pulled in only vague images of waiting on the street and threatening shadows, so she let them go until she finished dealing with the situation at the moment. She felt a presence nearby, and opened her non-visual senses further to try to get the stranger's location fixed before she revealed that she was awake. Beneath a constant bubbling noise, she heard a soft, rhythmic thudding that could have been mistaken for a heartbeat had it not been so far away, and a periodic hiss and swoosh that sounded like a small bellows. The other rose and walked across the wood floor, and she felt sure that the pattern of footsteps sounded familiar. Her nostrils flared slowly, and she detected a base of spicy musk under the blend of soap, aftershave and Calvin Klein for Men that identified the room's other occupant.

"Scully? You awake?" Fox Mulder ventured to the figure on his couch. The snapping-open of her light blue eyes and relieved exhalation was enough answer for him, so he moved on to the next question. "How are you feeling?"

She began to sit up, but dizziness and lethargy forced her back into a supine position. "Like I've been on the Tilt-a-Whirl all day. What happened?"

"What else?"

"What do you mean, what else?" She managed to turn her head toward him, and saw that he wasn't dressed for work. *How long was I out?* she wondered, then pondered the question. "I...I guess I'm hungry." *Starving is closer to the mark. What time is it?* She spoke her last thought, and her partner glanced at his VCR clock.

"Eight-thirty-seven. P.M."

"So I've been...asleep?...for about five and a quarter hours."

"It's Friday."

"Friday?!" . The last day she remembered was Wednesday afternoon. She pushed herself up against the couch arm and stared at her host. "I've been unconscious for over two days, and you didn't take me to the hospital?"

"A hospital wasn't an option. Too many questions."

"What happened?" Memories of earlier encounters with various opponents sprang to mind, and she felt a surge of adrenaline that accompanied the often-justified paranoia. "Are we being watched? Do you know who it is?"

"I need you to tell me what you remember about Wednesday afternoon before I can make any sense of what happened afterward."

She frowned in concentration and shifted to a sitting position. "We were...on our way to question...what was his name?..."

When her hesitation ran on too long, Mulder filled in the blank, his concern deepening. "Byron Soares. It was in relation to a series of interstate art thefts with some very strange homicides at the scenes: throat wounds, blood loss,

no signs of forced entry. His name was on a few checks confiscated from collectors who were caught in possession of the merchandise, and we were going to talk to him."

"Yes, and you dropped me off in front of his townhouse in..."

"Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia, while you found a place to park. I was waiting outside the building, and then ...I had this urge to go inside...as if someone was calling to me." She scowled in confusion at the blatant disregard for proper procedure, then her expression smoothed to a dazed mask and her eyes closed. "Need you..." she whispered huskily. "Come to me...feed my fire...give you...miiiine..." The smile that spread across her face was more predatory than pleasant.

"Who was it, Scully?" Mulder asked in the low tone of a therapist questioning a hypnotized patient, his own hackles lifting at the implications of her mesmerized state. He was ninety-percent certain of what had happened when he found her in Soares' house, but he had hoped the connection would break once she...he shook his head to stop that thought from running to its conclusion again. Thinking it the first time was bad enough.

"Who? What?" Instead of answering, she came out of her trance instantly, and he started at the bewildered bright amber gaze she fixed on him for the span of a breath. She blinked once, twice, and the normal azure hue returned.

"I...don't think we're gonna get any further on that right now. You seem to be blocking that particular memory. I'll be right back." He stood and went into his kitchen, and she heard the refrigerator door open and the clatter of a plastic container against the metal shelf.

"Are you saying I was abducted? In the middle of Philadelphia? By what, aliens?" She snorted, the typical Scully skepticism rising full-strength. "Come on, Mulder,

even you'd find that a little hard to swallow."

"Abducted? Not quite." A cup was removed from the mug tree, and liquid poured into it. "In the middle of Philadelphia? Yes." The microwave door opened, clicked shut, and program pads were touched. "Aliens? No." Microwaves hummed in their small box for about forty seconds, then the oven signaled its task completed, and its contents were extracted. She could smell a rich salty odor wafting from the next room before Mulder reappeared with the cup and a bottle of flavored iced tea. He offered the former to her.

"What is it?" She took the Princeton-logo mug and studied the dark fluid. The heady scent sharpened the ache in her stomach and, for an instant, her whole world was contained in that cup.

"Beef consommé?"

"What else? Consommé is supposed to be clear; this is opaque."

"I...added a few touches."

"Nothing eighty-proof, I hope. I haven't eaten in two days."

"No, nothing that would hurt the average human being." He twisted off the bottle cap and took a swig of his own drink as he resumed his seat.

She inhaled, feeling her mouth twitch with the wanting of it. Part of her thought she recognized the smell, and sent up warning signals, but it was drowned out by hunger. She tilted her head back and swallowed almost two-thirds of the liquid. When she brought the cup down at last, her mind had cleared, the need fading a little, and she licked the few drops off her lips while a mild euphoria set in. A moment later, Mulder's last comment caught her attention. She looked at the "soup" again, then back at her fellow agent. "Mulder, what is this, really?"

"Scully..." His preoccupation with the truth and his

uncertainty at how his partner would receive this particular piece of it struggled for a few seconds, then he plunged ahead with, "Scully, how much do you know about vampirism?"

"Vamp—" The last ten minutes, bits of the shadow-images and sudden identification of the main ingredient in her drink collided at light-speed, and she stared up at him, her expression wavering somewhere between incredulity and nausea. "You didn't..." she whispered, horrified.

"You drank it," he reminded her, his face very still.

Scully nearly threw the cup down on the end table. Choking, she clapped her hand over her mouth and tried to bolt for the bathroom. Her knees gave way under her, but she managed to push herself up to a crouch with the help of the sofa and staggered to her goal.

"Just enough, I see," he commented softly to himself.

"That's not funny!" she coughed from her kneeling position over the toilet bowl. Nothing came up, much to her dismay. In fact, the need to finish the "consommé" increased in her fight to purge what she had already drunk.

"It wasn't meant to be, but I knew you wouldn't drink it if you knew what it was from the beginning." *I'd rather deal with a pissed-off partner than a hungry vampire, and if I handle it wrong, I'm dinner.* "I 'm sorry to have tricked you like that, but the need would have gotten worse the longer we delayed, and I need you rational for this."

"For what? A bad Halloween prank?" she snapped, then winced at the reverberation her voice made against the tiles. "It's not even October."

"I wish it were a prank. Here, I brought this from your place." Mulder walked toward the bathroom and brought out her stethoscope from a plastic shopping bag. Pausing at the threshold and handing it to her, he suggested, "Check your pulse. Your heart and lungs, too."

She felt like refusing, then concluded that not only

would this be the best way to convince him, but that she could begin to check herself for any possible trauma. Slipping the instrument into position, she placed the disc under her blouse and held it to the correct spot.

White noise filled her ears.

Frowning a little, she adjusted the stethoscope and listened again.

No heartbeat.

She shifted the disc to one side and took a deep breath. *There! Normal respiration.* Practiced fingers lay on the wrist and felt for the rhythmic patter. Her look of expectant triumph faded into bafflement while she searched for the right vibrations and found nothing.

"That's the way I found you: no pulse, no heartbeat, not breathing. When I arrived at the townhouse, I didn't see you out front, and the door was open. Assuming you'd gone inside with his permission, I entered. The first floor was deserted, but when I saw the door open to the basement, I went down . I found you lying on the floor near what might have been a storeroom. When you didn't respond to CPR, I tried to force the door open, thinking maybe that was where Soares was hiding, but I couldn't get in. Probably barred and bolted from the inside. So, I did the only thing I could do, which was to bring you back here and wait until you woke up." *If you woke up...*

"But why didn't you take me to the nearest hospital?"

"You didn't have a pulse, Scully," he repeated. "There was no respiration and your heart had stopped." There, he had gotten it out, and the tension of reliving the incident broke within him. It had been like Samantha and Max and Lucy all over again: someone he knew had been taken away, and he could do nothing to prevent it. The storeroom door bore the brunt of his frustration and rage, but had not given way. Cheated of answers, or at least re-

venge, he had bundled his partner's body in a curtain from upstairs and laid her in the back seat for the drive to Alexandria. When rigor mortis had not set in by nightfall, he had begun to hope that his suspicions about what had happened in the basement would be confirmed. Against the possibility that he was wrong, he had spent the rest of the night planning his next actions and the report he would make to their supervisor on why he removed Scully from the site of her murder, drove her to his apartment and sat with her corpse for a day and a half. Her resurrection gave him more than one reason to be grateful for the existence of vampires. "There were also two deep puncture wounds and blood on your neck, and blood on your mouth. I took samples of both for typing and DNA scan."

"Wounds?" She turned to look in the mirror, shoving her brown-stained collar back to expose her throat. "I don't see anything." She snorted, reassured by a more prosaic discovery, and pointed at her image. "So much for your theory. Vampires aren't supposed to cast reflections."

"That's only in Stoker's novel. Elsewhere, it makes no mention. Besides, anything solid enough to bounce light waves off will cast a reflection, and you look pretty corporeal to me."

"This stethoscope must be defective, then." Stepping back into the living room, she took the earpieces out and said, "Now I can hear a heartbeat."

"It must be mine. And since when were you able to hear your own heartbeat, much less anybody else's, without amplification?" The look on his face added, *I've got you there.*

"Well..." Scully's mind dog-paddled frantically, trying to find some floating bit of reason to cling to before she sank with Mulder into his latest fantastical morass. At last, she fell back on an old but still useful maxim: "Look, there

has to be a logical explanation for this."

"I agree, but considering what's transpired since Wednesday, this is all I've been able to come up with so far. If you can think of something better, go ahead. Believe me, this experience hasn't been an E-ticket ride for me, either."

The edge in Mulder's voice forced her to notice his overall appearance for the first time since she awakened. The bruising around the hazel eyes, the tousled auburn hair and slapdash attempt at shaving told her he had slept little. *And eaten less, I'll bet,* she deduced from past experience. "Have you been up since Wednesday?" she asked, her tone taking on an emphatic shade. She looked up at him, and found she could hear the heartbeat grow louder.

Mulder blinked at her, then answered in a flat voice, "No, I did sleep a few hours here and there." He frowned, shook his head and said, "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"I was compelled to answer you. Don't do that."

"I just asked a simple question," she rebutted, indignant at the accusation. "You look like you've been pulling another all-nighter. Don't read more into it than there is."

He waved a hand in a dismissing gesture, cutting off what might have escalated to an argument. "All right, never mind. I'm going to fix myself some dinner, and we can discuss where to go from here."

The almost callous exclusion brought her up short, but she changed her reply to a less inflammatory question. "So, can I raid your pantry, or should I play it safe and order out?"

Mulder started to remind her that her "dinner" was on the end table where she had left it, then decided that it might be better if she learned the reality of her situation the hard way. "Help yourself," he replied with a shrug and turned toward the kitchen, "but I doubt you'll be able to

keep anything down for long."

"Well, we won't know for sure if I don't try."

An hour later, she was wedged glumly in a corner of the sofa, drinking the refilled mug of "consommé" as her partner tried not to enjoy his chicken stir-fry too much. She had sampled a dozen different foods from his refrigerator and cupboard, and ended up spitting every one of them into the sink, complaining of a bitter or spoiled taste and smell. When he had no problem with the same items, and it became clear that the sole thing with any appeal was the Rubbermaid bowl half full of cow blood and puréed beef---which she had mistaken for spaghetti sauce or barbecue---she conceded at last and warmed up another serving. After the first gag or two, her social conditioning gave way to the needs of her body, and she found it was like drinking a thick soup, if she didn't think about the contents too much. After a while, her insides stopped complaining and settled down, and she felt steady enough to ask, "So, where do we go from here?"

He set his fork down, took a sip of green tea to help sort his next words, then explained, "We need to consult an expert in this area, and if he can't meet us in person, I hope some of what you'll need to know can be relayed over a phone without attracting attention."

She arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that Raymond McNally made house calls."

His mouth quirked at her stab at humor, heartened by the attempt at normalcy. "No, not a vampirologist, a real vampire. At least, I think he is, unless I interpreted the clues wrong."

The other brow lifted at this confession. "Was this before we met, or have you been holding out on me?"

"Remember the Peyser cult case? Turned out one of the staff members was responsible for the murders, and she was just extradited back from Canada?" At Scully's nod, he

went on. "I'm pretty certain one of the Toronto cops we worked with up there is a vampire...like Peyser was. Detective's name was Knight."

"I remember him, but...none of this was in your report."

"Not in the official one. Besides, none of this was related to the murders, and I had no evidence beyond what I overheard. You can look at my notes on the case, though." He got up to collect his phone directory, flipped through the middle while scooping up the receiver and dialed the number with his thumb.

Scully could hear it ringing halfway across the room, followed by a faint, tinny voice. *"Metro Police Department."*

"Yes, Homicide Division, please. Thank you." He retrieved a pen and paper from his desk while he waited, and another voice came on the line half a minute later.

"Homicide."

"Detective Nick Knight, please."

Another wait, then, *"Knight."*

"Detective Knight, this is Agent Fox Mulder with the FBI. We worked together on the Peyser murders earlier this year."

"Yes, I remember. We faxed all our data on the case during the extradition. Was there something else you needed?"

"Sort of. This is related to one of the facts that wasn't in the reports. My partner and I have found ourselves in a predicament where I think you may be particularly qualified to help us."

There was a tense pause, then, *"In what way?"*

"Well," he ventured, giving Scully a pointed look, "I heard part of your conversation with Peyser, and I'm aware that you and he share a common... background."

Mulder thought he heard the other man's breath

catch---*old habits die hard, I guess*---followed by a careful *"I see. And of what help do you think I might be to you and your partner?"*

"Do you have a computer with a modem? I'd rather discuss this in a more private setting."

"Yes." Knight recited his home phone number. *"I can be online when I get in."*

"I'll call you then." He found the day's date on his wall calendar and added, "Any time after 6:00 sound okay?"

"Sure. See you in the morning."

"Right."

"Why 6:00?" Scully wanted to know while he hung up.

"It's about a half-hour after sunrise."

"Of course." She still wasn't convinced that Mulder's assertions about vampires were anything but his usual conjecture in the presence of what had to be a rare but definable condition. For all she knew, she could be reacting to a post-hypnotic suggestion planted in her mind by Soares for some bizarre reason, even though she doubted that there had been time for drug-induced coercion, and she would not have submitted to standard hypnosis willingly. As to Mulder's insistence that he had detected no vital signs, she put it down to some acoustic anomaly in the basement and his marginal training in discerning a pulse. There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for what she was experiencing, and once she had a chance to look at the blood samples and have a hypnotherapist take her under to see what she might be blocking from conscious memory, she would have an answer for her partner. At the moment, however, she was a guest in his apartment, and he had gotten her out of an unpleasant situation, so she would be polite and say nothing until she had actual evidence.

There was one thing, however, that she wanted to do

first. "Mulder, can you take me home? I appreciate your hospitality and all, but I'd like to get cleaned up and sleep in my own bed. I'd also like to download what I can remember about Wednesday while it's still fresh."

Mulder considered briefly and shrugged. "Sure. I brought you a change of clothes in case you woke up before I could get your apartment light-proofed and you had to stay here another day, but I was able to secure the blinds and curtains in your bedroom. If you give me a hand, I think I can do a quick job on the living room and bathroom. One of the consistencies in the folklore is the incendiary reaction to sunlight, and I'd rather not have to explain to Skinner why you spontaneously combusted tomorrow morning."

"Right," she agreed aloud. Mentally, however, she blurted out, *You "light-proofed" my bedroom? What's next, a coffin?*

Philadelphia—June 15; 5:15 A.M.

Byron Soares was preparing for bed when a sharp knock at his hotel suite door interrupted his routine. The familiarity of the presence on the other side told him it was one of his employees, but nothing more specific than that. Others of his kind had claimed that they could identify which of their initiates was nearby, but he was of the opinion that they exaggerated to heighten their status. It was a common practice among the vampire circles he frequented in his early days, and he doubted that things had changed much in the past six hundred years. Such "sibling" rivalry among the undead was a favorite pastime.

None of the women had a key to his room, so he was forced to let this one in himself. He almost smiled with relief when he saw Sally's round, unremarkable face turned up to greet his, a half-dozen newspapers in her hands. He was in

no mood to deal with Mildred's or Ann Marie's company this close to dawn; besides, he had been expecting Sally to return with the materials and information he had asked for. He stepped aside to let her enter.

Sally laid her burden on the end table near the sofa and set the change on top. "Someone asked our townhouse neighbors whether you'd been around since yesterday. We'd gotten out just in time, it seems. I'll arrange to have the house shut down if you feel we can't risk going back for a while. Do you want me to search for another place here in the city?"

"Not yet. I hope to meet our newest member there in a few days, and she'll need the surroundings to help her remember. Has Lewis returned my call?"

"Yes. He left a voice-mail message saying that if the item was in your hands before the end of next month, he would be satisfied. Mr. Lewis understands that setbacks happen, and since you've been, quote, 'so punctual and accommodating in the past', end quote, he was quite willing to extend the deadline." Her accent was precisely British, as was her manner, but a sharp ear could detect a practiced enunciation, rather than innate. Soares had brought her across in the mid-1800's, taking her from a housemaid's position to that of his secretary and bookkeeper. His decision had been less one of his own need for a clerk than her lack of aptitude for stealing, and it surprised him that she showed a talent for the tedium and intricacies of paperwork. She was the oldest of the three female vampires in his employ and, so far, the most trustworthy.

Soares' chuckle was grim. "He'd better be willing, after what I've gone through to add to his collection. What about emergency travel arrangements?"

"There are night flights available in any direction, should we need to split up. Whom would you prefer to travel

with this time?"

"Ann Marie. Mildred is more circumspect when she's with you."

"Yes, well, she doesn't seem to feel the need to impress me." She hesitated, licked her lips, then ventured, "Whom will our newest addition accompany?"

"Me, of course. That's another reason I don't want Mildred on my flight. Her interference could make Dana's orientation difficult. Ann Marie knows how to behave." A sigh. "All right, Sally, that's enough for today. Have Room Service send someone up around 9."

"Of course. Any preferences?"

He smiled faintly. "Surprise me."

Alexandria and Toronto-6:15 A.M.
Online conversation

Good morning, Det. Knight.

Good morning, Agent Mulder. What's the mission, should I choose to accept it?

How secure is your modem?

Secure as yours. What's the problem?

(Long pause)

My partner became a vampire two days ago.

How?

Attacked by a suspect. She woke up last night. Brought her cow blood, secured her apartment from the sun. What else should I do?

How is she?

Thinks I'm imagining things. No surprise. Had to trick her into drinking at first. She's reluctant, but going along so far. What else?

Give her whatever she can take in. Keep her away from sunlight. New vampires burn easily, but will heal from

anything but fatal wounds. She'll need more blood to recover. Too much may make her drunk, but it's better than being hungry.

What else?

Keep light and sound down. Senses are heightened, and she needs time to adjust. She should have an elder around to teach her necessities. Did her maker abandon her?

He wasn't there when I found her. S.O.B. probably planned to return for her later.

Maybe. Total abandonment is rare, but it happens. On the other end of the spectrum, some have difficulty getting free of those who brought them across. Will be coming down ASAP, tomorrow night at soonest. If she can arrange it, Dr. Lambert will accompany. She's working on a cure, and whatever data your partner can provide may help us both regain our mortality. Try to stay with cow blood; keeping her free of human might make reversing the effects possible. Be alert for muscle spasms. It's part of the transition: our bodies flush out chemicals we don't need and manufacture ones we do. Malnourishment is common if care is not taken, and spasms occur when the metabolic levels get too low.

How bad?

My own transition was painful, but it varies among us. My first blood was human, though; her change may be better or worse.

Great. Don't you people have a manual or something?

Not that I know of. Personally, I doubt any of us has ever done actual research on the subject. That's why Natalie's work is still in its early stages...

Toronto, Ontario--7:10 A.M
Phone conversation

"Hello?"

"Nat, it's me."

"Well, you're up late. What's the occasion?"

"Can you get a few days off?"

"Depends on what you've got in mind."

"Ha. Look, I just logged off of a very interesting conversation, and considering what we've been trying to accomplish for the last six years, I thought you might want in on it. Do you remember the Peyser case?"

"Uhmm...yeah, the cult murders. You told me Peyser turned out to be a vampire, and that it was the controlling part of a multiple personality. Like Ellen Simmons. Is this another one?"

"No. Remember the two FBI agents who traced the murders to Peyser and his group? It... seems, during an investigation, one of them was brought across against her will."

"Oh, my."

"Yeah. Her partner's trying to convince her that she needs to take her new state seriously, but she's a hard sell. That, and they're going to need help finding the vampire that attacked her. I'd like you along to talk to her; you're both doctors, you can explain it in terms she might accept more easily. Also, since you'd talked about needing to have a newly-made vampire for a comparison to my case, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity."

"Yes, this might be the breakthrough we need for the cure for you both. I've got a report to finish by tonight, but I'm sure I can get someone to sub for me for the next few days."

"Great. I'll arrange it with Reese. If it gets sticky, Mulder says he can put in a special request for us from the Bureau. We'll need a cold box for my 'supplies', and a medical clearance for it at Customs. He may not have access to a meat packing plant yet, so she'll need something to tide her

over during the first week until he can."

"I'll pick one up from one of the hospitals on my way to your place..."

"And I'll book us on a night flight to D.C. for tomorrow."

"What's the weather like down there?"

"Remember August, three years ago, when the precinct's air conditioning broke down?"

"Oh, God..."

Annapolis, Maryland--10:20 A.M.

Scully rolled over and opened one eye to check the time on her clock radio. Ten-twenty. Am I late for work? No, it's Saturday...or is it Thursday? Mulder would have called, anyway. There are some lab results I wanted to check, but those won't be ready until this afternoon. By the time I finish breakfast and run a few errands, they'll be in. She sat up and ran fingers through her shoulder-length bright copper hair, then rubbed her eyes clear. I feel like I've slept for a week, but I'm still tired. Must have been that dream last night. Way too vivid for me. I should tell Mulder; he'll probably find it amusing. Vampires... hmmmph! Been hanging around him too long... She noticed that the curtains and blinds were drawn, and frowned in concentration while she turned on the bedside lamp and headed for the window. Drawing closer, she could see that the curtain panels were paper-clipped together and stuck to the wall along the bottom and sides with duct tape. Who did this? I remember something about them in the dream, but...

She pulled the outer drapes apart and twisted the blinds control wand sharply.

Mulder was three steps past the threshold of the entrance to Scully's building when he heard the piercing

scream. He dropped the bag of groceries, drew his gun and ran the last few yards to her apartment. A door across the hall flew open when he reached hers and stood on one side of the frame, pounding on the plywood. "Scully?!"

"What's wrong?" The neighbor, her hands dripping soapy water, stepped out and began to approach him. "Mr. Mulder?"

"Go back inside, please, Ms....Hanson." She opened her mouth to protest, but when he flashed her his sternest "Federal agent" look, she withdrew quickly. He used his key and closed the door behind him. His "Scully?" was quieter this time, but no less worried. The sunlight glow from one room told him what had happened, and the moan of agony confirmed it. He hurried to her bedroom, slapped the blind slats down and yanked the curtains together. The lamp gave enough illumination to let his vision adjust almost immediately, yet a brief 360-degree scan revealed nothing. A hoarse gasp behind him and to his left, however, drew his gaze to a shut closet door. "Aw, Scully..."

"M-mulder?" she whimpered, her voice thick with pain.

"Right here, partner," he answered softly. He opened the door and knelt before her. She had drawn her knees up to her chest and buried her face in her crossed arms. "How bad is it?"

"'T burns...my whole face...m-my arm. Oh, God, it hurts..."

"Let me have a look." He laid a reassuring hand on her forearms and steeled his expression for the worst.

Her head lifted from its shelter, and he saw a mask of mottled, blistering skin framing pale yellow eyes and small but lethal fangs. She blinked a few times, and the seared face puckered in anguish as she whispered, "I can't see..."

"It's just temporary. Knight said all but fatal injuries

heal rapidly. I'll get you something to help you feel better. Be right back." He got to his feet and hurried to her kitchen. Pulling out the sealed bowl, he poured half of what was left of the blood into a cup and brought it to her. "Here, it's gazpacho this time."

As he put it into her hand, she caught the beef scent and threw the cup with a sharp "No! I won't drink that!" Denial battled with knifing hunger, and her head dropped forward onto her knees. "I'm not a m-monsterrr...."

Mulder glanced at the mug that had missed his shoulder and the spreading dark stains on the wall and rug, thinking, *Well, there goes her security deposit* before focusing his attention on the distraught young woman. "Of course you're not a monster, Scully," he assured her in a gentle tone. "I should know: I'm the Bureau's resident expert."

The attempt to calm her with a joke was skewered by a broken "'S not funny."

"All right, I'm sorry. This is hard enough for you to accept. I just wanted you to realize that, no matter how bad this gets, you shouldn't let it destroy you."

"It's too late for the p-pep talk, Mulder. Soares already destroyed me." She "looked" up at him, her eyes shining white with rage. "He...he lured me down to the basement. I didn't hear him until he grabbed me from behind---" her hand went to her throat and a freshet of tears followed older tracks down her ravaged face--- "he-he drank my blood... made me drink his...all I knew was that I was dying, and I was too afraid to let go again, so I did what he told me to do...and when the light went away, I thought, 'He lied to me. He said it would save me, and I'm still dead.' It was worse than rape." The anger faded to panic, and her lower lip trembled. She bit down to stop it, and hissed in pain when her new teeth broke the skin.

"And that's why I called Knight," he explained

carefully. "This is something I can't help you get through, but he can. He said that new v---those in your condition need an elder to teach them how to adjust to their new life. He's agreed to come down and show you what you need to survive. What I can do is make sure that you're supplied and safe from the sun for now. All right?"

"But..." A knock at the front door cut into her question.

"One thing at a time, okay? I'll get it." He stood once more and went out of the room.

It was the neighbor, with a few others behind her. "Is Dana all right?" She held the carry bag he had left on the hall floor.

"She's fine, Ms. Hanson. It was...just a bad hair day."

"What?"

"It's okay, Paula," Scully's voice called out. "I...I slipped and fell in the bathroom." The distortion of bending sound waves and distance hid the strain in her tone, but Mulder heard the effort she was making to sound casual.

"Just a few bumps," he added, relieving her of the groceries. "She'll call you later. Thanks, Ms. Hanson." He closed the door on her surprised expression and took the packages of hamburger and steak into the kitchen. It took him a minute to set up the blender and throw in the first few handfuls to purée. The last of the blood went into another cup, took a warming pass through the microwave, and was brought into the bedroom.

"Let's try this again," he said, touching the mug to the back of her hand. She started to reach for it, but he pulled back a little. "First promise you won't toss this, too."

She swallowed loudly and nodded. Once it was in her grasp, she clutched it like a lifeline and inhaled the contents' warm scent. The gag reflex vanished in an instant and she gulped the liquid greedily. When the cup was drained,

she handed it back with a rough "More."

"That's all of the older stuff. I'm making up some fresh right now. Just hang on a minute."

The bright eyes blinked and squinted at him in a way that made him nervous. "Hungry..."

"I know. It's coming." He put distance between them and strained what he could from the first batch. While a second whirred in the blender, he hurried the warm half-cup to his waiting partner.

She tossed that back in two swallows, but her "More" this time had less of a growl to it. It took four more trips before she was sated enough to hold the empty cup and not shove it back at him. Cleaning the thin ring of blood around her mouth with her tongue, she turned mortal blue eyes on him and smiled for the first time. "I can see now."

"Good. How's the pain?" Most of the rawness had faded from her skin.

The smile widened, and he was relieved to see human cuspids. "Almost gone."

"Great. Feel strong enough to stand?"

"I...I can try." Wobbly at first, she managed to get to her feet with a little help. Wincing at the mess on the rug, she looked at the window a little fearfully. "I thought I had dreamt it all, so I ignored what you'd done to the curtains. It was...like jumping into a live volcano."

"I'll fix it. You go back to bed, and I'll finish with Elsie."

"Okay." When he disappeared into the kitchen again, she toddled to the bathroom to wash her face. She grimaced at the burns still visible, patted cool water on them and brushed her hair.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed upon his return. He held another full mug of strained blood out to her, saying, "Just so you know, I don't do bedtime stories." She

wrinkled her nose at him and took the offered cup, but did not drink right away. Mulder noticed the hesitation and her pensive expression, and cocked his head quizzically. "What?"

"I don't know. It just...it just seems too...normal, I guess. I mean, vampires are supposed to sleep in coffins on their native soil, dress like head waiters at five-star restaurants, and drain their human victims in a minute, right? But I sleep on a Sealy with J.C. Penney sheets, wear the same type of clothing every other female agent wears, and drink cow's blood like it's coffee. So, what's wrong with this picture?"

Mulder considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "Look at it this way: is the Bureau we've come to know depicted exactly that way in the movies or on TV?"

"I admit there are differences, but it's not like this."

An "aha!" look came over his face. "Camouflage." She frowned at him in puzzlement, and he clarified. "If you want to hide in plain sight, perpetuate such fantastic stories so that no one would associate you with that sort of being. No one would believe a vampire could be a homicide detective in Toronto---"

"Or an FBI agent in Washington," she interrupted, her voice strained and weary.

He acknowledged her admission with a nod, but did not echo it. "---but there's Knight, using his abilities in the performance of his job. So how unreal can it be?"

"Maybe," she half-conceded. A abrupt thought elicited a bitter snort. "Here's irony for you: cases of the paranormal being investigated by a paranormal herself. An X-file, hunting X-files." Her face pinched in an attempt at outer control, but a few tears escaped, and she tried to cover it by taking a drink.

Next step in the grief process: sorrow, he thought. Her personal paradigm's been severely compromised, and

she's trying to salvage what she can. I just hope she can weather the adjustment. He re-sealed the curtains, then did a more thorough job on the windows in the other rooms. "Soon as you can, replace these blinds with dark opaque shades and some kind of hook on the bottom so that they won't go up by accident."

"Okay," came the flat-voiced answer. She inhaled deeply, let it out in a slow sigh, then announced, "I'm tired." She returned the cup, now just over a third full, and slipped back into bed.

"I'll stop by tonight, see if you need anything. There's a bowl in the fridge; forty to forty-five seconds in the microwave seems to work. Knight thought it would be a good idea if you stuck to cow blood at first. It's simpler to obtain, and a doctor friend of his who's been working on a cure wants to see if a strict animal diet might make it easier to reverse the effects."

She nodded, half-drowsy, but when he turned to leave, she reached out and grabbed his wrist with the speed of a striking cobra. He gasped at the cold vise-grip and stared down in surprise. The eyes were still blue, but there was a yearning in them he could not read at first. Then he noticed the dazed expression overlying the need, and the reason became clear: *She doesn't want to be alone, and normally she wouldn't ask, but right now she's just drunk enough that her behavior's affected.* Knight had said to give her whatever she could take in at first; otherwise, she would be ravenous and in pain during the next stage of the transition. He had also warned that too much at once, even from an animal, was inebriating to a vampire.

Mulder gave her a faint, encouraging smile and laid his free hand over where she clutched his arm. His wordless agreement to stay released him long enough to return the rest of the blood to the storage bowl and bring a chair and his

notepad back to the bedside, but once he was settled, she reached out again. The gesture this time, however, was a request for contact. *She must really be in a bad way if she considers me an anchor to reality.* He slid his hand into hers, returned the squeeze she gave it, and watched her drop into sleep. Her grasp loosened after a while, and he extricated himself carefully but remained within earshot, cleaning up the spilled blood and making quiet phone calls to animal rendering plants in the District area. Wording his requests in terms of special government research allayed the suspicions of most of the plants' supervisors, and using Scully's name ensured that there would be no confusion later when she began placing her own orders. *Getting vouchers by the A.D. and Accounting could be dicey, so she'll have to pay for this herself. Taking from different places should spread her need just thinly enough to prevent too many questions.* In writing down relevant information from each place, he found himself imagining again, as he had done during the drive back to D.C. and the first night's vigil, what would have happened had his and Scully's positions been reversed. *She would've had me declared dead at the scene and argued with Skinner about wanting to do the autopsy. Whether she got to or not, my waking up in the morgue would've been a shock to somebody, presuming they didn't bump me to the front of the line for my sake. No last-minute rescues from Scully or old Navajos this time.*

1:37 P.M.

He was getting ready to leave to pick up the first of the supplies when she jerked abruptly and stiffened, a high laryngeal keening sound emanating from her. Wide-spread fingers clawed through the blanket and sheet and buried themselves in the mattress. Her mouth opened wide, but he

heard no intake of air, seeing the canines double in length instead. *Knight mentioned spasms were part of the next stage, but nothing like this!* According to the detective, the new vampire's metabolism was purging certain chemicals from the body and manufacturing others from the blood it took in. His own transition had been uncomfortable, but relatively mild due to the fact that his first ingestion was of human blood. An initial diet of bovine hemoglobin, it was clear, was not going to be sufficient.

Mulder pulled out his cell-phone and dialed the home number Knight had given him, but got the answering machine. His partner convulsing before his eyes, he left a hurried, almost panicked message then ran to the kitchen for the container and a clean cup. While the cow blood warmed, he ripped open a tray of round steak and wrung out what he could for the next batch. The microwave pinged; he scooped the cup out and dashed back to the bedroom.

He couldn't lift her head to drink, so he tried to pour it directly down her throat. She choked, swallowed, then reached up to the source of the food and drew it to her. He got an arm underneath her shoulders and held her upright while she drank. The paroxysm eased after five minutes, but she still shuddered, and he knew the little she'd taken in would not last long. He shifted his hold to lower her onto the bed, intending to fetch more blood.

When his left arm passed in front of her face, however, she let out a sharp and snatched it to her. Gleaming lemon-colored eyes flew open, meeting his in a blind stare, and sank her fangs into the bottom of his wrist. Mulder bit back most of the yelp of pain and tried to pull free, but her hold was preternaturally strong. He looked away, fighting nausea and dizziness as she fed for what seemed to be the longest three-and-a-quarter minutes in his life. At last, she lifted her mouth from the wound and slumped like a rag doll

against him.

He laid her down once more and, swaying, made it back to his chair. Breathing slowly to clear his swimming head, he watched for the aftereffects to her first consumption of human blood. To his relief, she twitched a few times, then settled into oblivious sleep. The dull pain in his arm drew his attention to the punctures, and he saw the bleeding had stopped. *Good thing, too, because I'm not sure if I've got the energy to tend it.* "Ever considered transferring to the IRS?" he asked in a voice just above a whisper, then passed out.

5:12 P.M.

Mulder was gone when Scully awoke. She had a second or two of disorientation, then the events of that morning came roaring in, and the grief and fear welled up in her again. "Oh, God..." she whispered, curling into a tight ball and sobbing for at least twenty minutes. She lay in that position for another ten before she felt steady enough to stir out of bed. The smell of dried blood caused her to glance back at the pillow and sheets, and she winced at the red-brown spatters amid the stylized floral pattern. *Why couldn't it have been that ugly lime set I got for Christmas?* She also noticed a thin yellowish stain on her pajamas and another body-shaped one on the bed where she had lain. *What's this stuff? Perspiration?* The punctures in the mattress confused her, and she made a mental note to ask her partner about it. Falling into "scientist" mode, she clipped, bagged and labeled sample squares with blood spots and stains, cut a lock of her hair and got a skin scraping for comparison, then bagged her ruined clothing and took a long hot bath. She had a moment of relieved amusement at removing her necklace with its tiny gold cross, thinking *Well, here's another bit of folklore shot to hell.*

Feeling calmer and more grounded, she changed into semi-casual clothing and stripped the bed. The breeze evoked by pulling off the sheets caught a piece of paper that had fallen over on the nightstand and eased it toward the floor. She reached out and grabbed it before it touched down, unaware of the speed at which she was moving.

The writing on the paper was in Mulder's hand, and succinct in its information:

Dear Scully,

Four things to remember-

(1) You're a vampire;

(2) Don't open the drapes until after sunset(8:32). For reason why, see (1);

(3) Dinner in marked bowl in fridge;

(4) Will stop by with supplies tonight.

Mulder

As her gaze returned to the first numbered line, the brief illusion of normality crumbled around her, and her chest constricted and eyes burned, signaling another crying fit. "No," she ordered herself, swallowing the pain down, "I won't succumb to this every time it hits me. I need to learn to handle this." *Soares is a dead...whatever-he-is, if I have to stake him with my own hands.* The anger directed at the vampire who had changed her burned off the depression, and she let the momentum carry her through a cup and a quarter of "soup"(Mulder's label on the bowl) and three pages of notes detailing her experience up to then. She phoned the lab for the status on the test results she had planned to collect that afternoon, arranged to have them left on her desk, then called Mulder on his cellular and asked him to pick up

the report before he came over. *Good thing Forensics keeps different hours,* she thought after hanging up. A sudden memory of an appointment prompted her to check her organizer. *Oh, great. Lunch with Mom tomorrow at one, and I've had to reschedule twice already. At least I've got a different excuse: "No, it's not work this time, Mom. I've developed a sudden allergy to sunlight. Seems I don't tan anymore; I turn into a charcoal briquette." And explaining the diet change is going to be fun. She's diving into a Cobb salad while I sip Chateau Holstein '96. Maybe I can cheat and order steak tartare.* She managed to keep the bitterness out of her voice when she made the call, and while her mother was annoyed at another postponement, the change to a late dinner at one of D.C.'s better restaurants mollified her. *I really can't blame her for being disappointed over all these cancellations,* Scully mused when the conversation ended. *Since Melissa's death, Mom's been trying to maintain ties to her remaining daughter, and my job doesn't make it easy/* The reality that this sudden alteration in her life would also change how she interacted with her family, old friends and co-workers settled heavily on her already-burdened shoulders, and the need to lie to those she'd always trusted in order to survive burned another hole in her moral foundation. *Can I rely on my self-control? When will I stop looking at the people I care about and see them as food? Will animal blood be enough to sustain me, or am I just delaying the inevitable, and be forced to turn to humans to stay alive? How much of this can Mulder take on himself? My whole world's fallen apart in two days, and none of the pieces fit together anymore.* Sorrow rose to the surface again, and this time she let it wash through. To her surprise, the tears did not last longer than a minute or two, and she felt a tired calm replace the sadness. *Getting numb, I guess. Harder to think clearly, but it beats hysteria.*

For lack of anything more interesting to do, she decided to watch television. Ten minutes of channel surfing later, a sharp sensation stirred in her awareness, and she wanted---needed---to go outside. The walls seemed to close in and the hunger she felt yesterday paled to the ache inside her now. *Is it dark out?* She checked the clock, smiled to see that it was after 8:30, then carefully peeled back one of the curtains and found faint and fading light struggling to get to her. Something within hissed in pleasure at the growing dark and uncoiled itself stiffly, weak from malnourishment but strong enough to make its needs known. She unclasped the living room draperies, stood back to pull them open, then eased the blinds up a bit at a time. There was a sting of heat at first, followed by a sensual coolness that grew while the glow diminished. *That feels so good...bet it's even better outside.* She transferred a few necessities to her belt-pack and wrote a quick note to Mulder. On her way to the door, she heard the soft drumbeat and bellows again, punctuated by a loud knock and a solicitous "Dana?" She wrenched the door open to a startled Paula Hanson.

"Hi!" Scully greeted, a little too brightly even to her ears. The thudding and wind sounds became more pronounced with the neighbor's proximity, and Scully realized that she was hearing the woman's heart and lungs. The physician in her made note of a slight rattle in the breathing and planned to mention a doctor's visit and second-hand smoke at a later date.

"Hi! I just thought I'd stop by and see if you were okay. Your partner didn't say much."

"Oh, it was...just a spot of...water on the floor," she replied, finding herself distracted by a sharpening of the hunger and an overwhelming scent of sweetness she couldn't quite place but wanted more of. Instinct told her it was coming from the mortal in the doorway, and if she spoke the

right way, the female would enter and give her what she needed. "I was...just going out, but if..." *Come in...take you into me...give you pleasures you have never felt before...*

When the hesitation went on too long, Paula prompted with an echoed, "'But if', what?"

The familiarity of the voice broke the spell, and Scully's mind cleared with an astonished *What am I thinking of?!* "Ah---I---think I forgot something. L-look, I'll...call you tomorrow, okay?" The last two words were almost a snarl. She slammed the door in the neighbor's face and leaned against the jamb, trembling. She did not hear the reaction on the other side; all she knew was that the heartbeat and breath and the blood that sustained both were walking away from her, and she fought the screaming urge to go out and call it back, rushing instead to the refrigerator and snatching the bowl out. She dropped into a sitting position, pulled the lid off and drank directly from the container. The craving lessened to a manageable desire, but she scraped up every available drop like leftover frosting with her fingers. Licking them clean, she felt her mind cool into more lucid thought. *Not enough, but it will do for now. Mulder will be here soon. He'll bring more. I have to stay here until then.*

She tried to submerge the hunger by diverting her mind elsewhere, and the numbing effects of an old movie seemed to help. It was past the dinner hour, so food commercials were not as prominent a reminder of what she needed and what she could no longer have. The film was nearing the climax when she heard another heart and pair of lungs approach her door. *Not Mulder,* she knew without thinking, and rose in answer to the rap of knuckles on wood. *Male, definitely... nervous, but with a hunger of his own...I can smell it from the hall...*

She opened the door to Frohike.

"Hello, Agent Scully," he began, his manner a little

flustered. "I...couldn't reach Mulder at his apartment, and I've lost his cell-phone number, so I figured I could bring this to you to pass on to him when you saw him next."

"You're in luck, Frohike," she replied, straining to keep her smile pleasant with the heat of the Need streaming through her like lava. "Mulder is supposed to be stopping by any minute now. Come in, sit down." When he passed her, she added, "Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee, soda?" Her tongue flicked reflexively along the edge of her teeth, and she arched her back in a suggestive pose as she closed the door behind her.

"Tea would be fine, thank you." He laid the manila envelope on the end table near the couch and sat next to it. He watched her walk by him toward the kitchen, her hips swaying a bit more than he remembered. He was in her apartment, sober, and she was preparing something for him. This was better than he had hoped he would ever experience in this millennium.

Scully could feel the longing in him for her, and while part of her was amazed by the depth of it, another answered it with a feeling just as strong. She wrestled with the presence, but her resistance faded until it seemed she was only along for the ride. *Hungry...the fire in him will ease my pain, make me strong... a little...just enough to keep me whole...* She filled a cup of water and placed it in the microwave to heat. When it was ready, she dropped a teabag in and brought it on a tray with a squeeze bottle of lemon juice and a sugar bowl. "I have artificial sweetener, if you like." She kept her gaze cast away from his and her mouth movement small, knowing the Change was upon her and she didn't want to spook him into a struggle, certain the blood would be sweeter if taken without a fight.

"No, this is quite satisfactory. You---you've heard, of course, about the experiments they'd done with aspartame,

and the fact that the company tried to conceal..."

"Of course. Shocking, isn't it? So, tell me, what brings you here in search of my partner?" she asked in a husky voice, settling onto the armrest on his side of the couch.

He swallowed at seeing the way she straddled it and looked up into a pair of gleaming golden eyes. "I wanted..."

"I know what you want, mortal, and I can fulfill that need if you give me what I desire. Will you do that for me?" She smiled, revealing her fangs slowly when he answered with a dazed nod. "Excellent," she whispered, pushing Frohike down onto the cushions and lying on top of him. His personal scent was mixed with a stale cologne odor, but that was no deterrent when compared to the richer aroma of his blood. She allowed herself to luxuriate in the fragrance for a few moments, nuzzling his bared throat before sinking her teeth into the pale flesh just under the ear.

A rapid series of thumps caught at her consciousness, but she pushed it aside and was about to begin the feast under her when the noise came again, accompanied by a male voice calling to her. A half-buried presence recognized it and swam wildly to the surface, yelling Mulder's name in her own mind until the creature was forced to give way, leaving Scully to tumble off her erstwhile victim and scramble to the door.

Mulder was just about to use the key when the entrance flew open, revealing a red-haired apparition with glowing eyes and sharp canines that looked a lot like his partner.

"Get him out of here, get him out of here, get him out..." Her voice almost a growl, she waved at the figure on the sofa and stepped back, panting.

What's he...? Damn... Mulder set the cooler and fast food bags in the nearest chair and hurried to where Frohike

lay. The smaller man's neck was exposed, but unmarked, and from the blissful, semiconscious expression, he had not resisted. *Talk about dying with a smile on your face!* the agent thought wryly, casting a glance back in Scully's direction before returning his attention to the Gunman and jostling his arm. "Hey, Frohike, wake up."

"Yes, I...wha-? Mulder?" Frohike blinked at the intruder of his spectacular erotic dream, then realized where he was and sat up at once. "What happened?"

"You dozed off, big guy." He bobbed his head toward the still-steaming cup. "Caffeine didn't come in time, I guess."

"No, I suppose..." He stared at the tea, trying to reconstruct the events before the now-unraveling dream, looking from Mulder standing over him to Scully hovering near the door, arms crossed tight and shoulders drawn in, seeming to study the rug. "I...have those reports you asked for, but when I couldn't get hold of you, I came here." He picked up the envelope and handed it over. "Byers said---what was it again?---that he's waiting for a download from a contact of his in Interpol. Seems there was a series of art thefts similar to the case you're working on about fifty years ago, but since that one had connections to some ranking families in Europe, and the pieces were stolen from Third Reich members, the authorities back then decided to keep the information under wraps. Do you think you might have a copycat?"

"Not sure yet. Thanks," Mulder replied, tapping the packet into his left hand with his right. "So, you want me to walk you to your car? You look kind of tired, and I'm sure you'll want to go home, catch up on some downtime."

"I...should, yes," Frohike agreed vaguely as he stood. When Mulder began to accompany him to the door, he added, "No, that's all right. I can get to my car by myself,

thanks." He watched, puzzled, at Scully's haste to put distance between them.

"Okay, well, drive carefully, then."

"I will. Good night. Good night, Ms. Scully. Thank you for the tea."

There was a pause, then, "You're welcome. Good night."

Once the door was closed between predator and former prey, Mulder removed the bags from the top of the cooler and virtually shoved the box into her hands. Hazel and yellow eyes met, and the next words out of his mouth---"That was far too close"---died unspoken at her remorseful, frightened look. *She knows it was, and how close she came to killing. Good thing I made that extra stop.* He nodded toward the kitchen, his face deadpan, and he waited at least two minutes before following her in. She had removed one of eight quart jars full of dark red liquid and was drinking from it while standing over the sink. He sat at the table and began to unwrap his own meal. When she "came up for air," he asked in a calm voice, "So, what happened?"

"I was hungry," she retorted, almost snapping at him. After a moment of silence and a long shuddering breath, however, she went on in a more composed manner. "I'm sorry. I think... I think this morning took more out of me than we anticipated, and what was in the refrigerator didn't seem to be enough." She picked up a hospital-issue pint bag of human blood that had been marked for disposal due to age, one of four she'd found atop the jars in the cooler, and held it out to her partner. "This isn't for Knight, is it?"

Toronto--9:19 P.M

"Well, twice in almost two weeks," LaCroix greeted Nick, appearing at the detective's left seemingly from no-

where. The Raven's owner gestured to the server for his usual before finishing his observation. "Is something in the air, or is this a social visit?"

"I've had something of a challenge thrown in my lap, and I thought your experience in this area might be useful." He glanced at the dancers and drinkers in the immediate vicinity, determined the mortal/vampire ratio, and announced in a voice pitched for the latter's hearing, "An acquaintance in the States has been brought into our circle against her will."

"And she wants to file a complaint?"

"Her...initiator left her to fend for herself."

"Ah, that is a problem. Does she know his name?"

"Byron Soares. Ever run across him?"

"Not by that name. Besides, I may be old, but I hardly know everyone."

"She and her partner were investigating his involvement in art theft and homicide, and that's when it happened."

"Another detective? Is this a trend I've missed?"

"FBI."

"My, we are breaking down a lot of doors, aren't we?" LaCroix bobbed his head toward the sound booth where he did his nightly radio program, indicating that privacy was now required, and Nick followed his maker there.

Once the door was closed, the older vampire's tone became more serious. "I don't know this Soares, but I have heard of him. This pilfering of other people's creativity is an old game of his. He stole for both sides during the Second World War, the last I heard, and several of the well-to-do have enlisted his services over the years."

"How far back?"

LaCroix shrugged. "Renaissance, I think. Wouldn't be surprised to hear that he's taken more than a few pieces

several times. But moving objects from owner to owner is a petty offense, and what's a few more dead mortals in an already swelling sea of bodies? Abandoning one's duty to a fledgling...now, there's a real crime. Untrained, she could expose us to the mortal world, and there are few enough of us already. I assume her partner didn't encounter their quarry?" The younger man nodded. "Does he know what she's become?"

"He recognized it before she did. He has a...professional interest in what mortals call the 'paranormal'. He's been taking care of her for the last couple of days."

"Interesting. Devotion of that sort is rare among mortals when it comes to us. That either makes him very brave or a fool with a death wish."

"Can't say. I did get a call from him this afternoon, but even if I'd been awake, I doubt I could have been much help. She was having violent convulsions; I heard it in the background, and he sounded like he was at his wit's end. She took some of his blood, and that stopped the attack."

"What was she drinking before this?"

"Cow's blood."

"Ah-ha, the...'vegetarian' diet. No wonder the young lady had a reaction: fledglings require blood of their own species, or they sicken. You wouldn't give an infant soy milk, would you? Or seaweed burgers to a wolf cub? Of course not. It's the same with vampires. There are needs no animal blood can replace in those first crucial days, which is why the initiation is important. It's more than teaching the fledgling to kill, although the mind must accustom itself to what the body will require. After the transition, of course, any blood will do, but the human variety from time to time keeps the body in condition. Taken live is best of all. For her, it was like having a fine meal after a lifetime of junk food."

"And if she'd stayed with the cow's blood?"

"Sickness, of body and mind. Death, I'm certain, if she didn't break free and take the first mortal she saw. I'm surprised he's still alive. Most new vampires are insatiable."

"Why did you never tell me this when I first came across?"

"Remember what passed for science in those days? All I knew was what was necessary. There were no terms to explain it back then. Besides, would it have changed anything? You still deny what you must do to survive."

"I don't deny the need. I just won't kill to satisfy it."

"So you carry a gun and shoot people, and before that you carried a sword and ran them through. I'm sorry, Nicholas, but I fail to see the difference between your version of dealing death and mine."

"I kill only when there's no choice, and to protect the innocent."

"You kill to maintain the mortals' law for them, and if you spent more time hunting those who would not be missed, whose deaths would not be mourned, then these 'innocent' you have such concern for would not need protection so often."

Nick snorted. "That sounds close to altruism. You never seemed that worried about the innocent before."

"Death takes the innocent and the guilty. I'm a bit more fussy than that: I take only those unfortunates whose deaths will not be traced to me or mine." He waved a dismissive hand. "But we've danced 'round this argument before, and it leads nowhere. So, as to what else your young friend needs to know: her first sojourns outdoors should be supervised. The first taste of night can be intoxicating to fledgling senses, and if it doesn't throw her into shock, she may run wild. In an area thick with mortals, like the Eastern Seaboard, that's a recipe for disaster. Transition can take up

to a week, depending on her metabolism and what sort of blood she takes in."

"Should we expect any more convulsions?"

"Not if she feeds properly. If you must insist on a bovine diet, mix it with human and alternate with pure human until her transition is complete. After that, she may drink what she likes. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm on in three minutes."

"What do I do if Soares comes after her?"

"'Do'? You do nothing, Nicholas. Whatever happens is between the young lady and her master, and is not for interlopers, however well-intended." He paused long enough to settle into his chair, then added, "Unless, of course, you want to take his place."

"And for that I'd have to kill him, right?"

"Better you than her. You know how the Enforcers are about vampires slaying their masters."

Nick nodded grimly, remembering the time he'd tried it.

Toronto--10:13 P.M.

From the way Nick scanned the lab, Natalie was almost sure that the subject he wanted to discuss was not related to any of his present cases. When Tracy didn't appear two steps behind him, she upped the certainty another notch. *And since the most recent subtopic on vampirism deals with the reason for our upcoming roadtrip...* "How's Agent Scully doing?"

Nick was about to open his mouth to give her an update, but her question closed it into a puzzled frown. "How did you know...?"

She gave the detective one of her sly smiles, picked

up a round-bottomed flask, looked at him through it and announced in a bad Slavic accent, "Madame Natalie sees all, Madame Natalie knows all." He chuckled and shook his head while she returned the vessel to its holder. "Let's just say that when you check for witnesses on the way in, and I don't see your partner anywhere, it usually means you want to talk vampires, and Scully's the most logical candidate for deliberation. So, you were going to tell me...?"

His ingenuous grin shifted into an almost guilty expression, and he sighed. "She seemed fine the last time Mulder saw her this afternoon---" Natalie's brow furrowed with apprehension at that---"but I doubt if you're going to get a pure sample from her."

"You mean she drank...? Oh, that's just great." The pathologist almost threw her pen on the examination table in frustration. "Where did she get it? From Mulder, one of her neighbors, some stranger on the street?"

"Nat, he didn't have a choice. Her body couldn't adjust on cow's blood alone, and she went into severe convulsions. From what I heard in the message he left while it was happening, it sounded pretty bad. He was afraid he'd lose her. When I called him earlier this evening, he told me he'd given her some of his own blood, which managed to stop the attack. I...checked with someone more knowledgeable than I about fledglings, and it turns out that Mulder's instincts were right."

"Ah-ha, so...what else did LaCroix have to say?".

Nick started, realized, And who else would I have gone to for information like that? and said, "Am I that transparent?"

"Among us mortals? Just to your doctor...I hope. I don't know about your other 'associates'. Anyway..."

"Anyway, he says that new vampires are fragile during the first few days after they awaken, and their future be-

havior depends on how much and what kind of care they get at the time. The old folklore about vampires as ravenous predators comes mostly from young ones who nearly starved during their transition and went mad."

"Which explains the need for the control of a vampire master. Well, I hope she's doing all right," Natalie conceded, disappointed by the lost opportunity for more conclusive evidence, but too practical to let such setbacks rankle her and too compassionate to allow someone to suffer for the sake of even a possible cure. "If she keeps it to a minimum, I might be able to get a few clues before her body changes altogether."

"I don't think you'll get an argument from her on that. Her partner said it was hard enough to get her to drink the cow blood, and she was unconscious when she took his. I don't think she'll remember what happened."

"Don't be too sure. People in comas have been known to recall parts of conversation spoken in their presence while they were 'out of it.'" She sighed, tucking the pen behind her ear. I just wish we didn't have to wait until tomorrow night."

"Yeah, so do I."

Annapolis--10:25 P.M.

"We have to tell Skinner."

Scully was thoughtful enough to wait until Mulder had finished swallowing the mouthful of breaded fishstick before she dropped the bomb. From the sound he made afterward, however, it seemed like the bit of mixed whitefish was trying to imitate a salmon and swim back upstream. He coughed, took a large drink from his waxed paper cup of soda, and managed to ask in a somewhat strained voice, "And what brought you to <u>that</u> conclusion?"

"I've had plenty of time to think about it while being cooped up in this apartment. If I'm to stay with the Bureau, I need help with my 'camouflage'. Granted, I won't be of much use until Knight gets here, but if we negotiate carefully, I think I'll be safe enough."

"Are you sure you can trust him? Besides the centuries of bad press about vampires, I'm afraid the temptation to exploit might be too great."

"I don't think we have too many options right now. Anyway, if the tales of vampires being able to hypnotize people are true, I have that as a way out."

"Take it from me, it's not a tale."

She began to ask him what he meant, then remembered last night. "Right. Sorry."

He shrugged. "You didn't know any better. Just be more careful. I've...told him you'd picked up something nasty while you were in Philadelphia, and---" he paused at her snort of grim amusement---"and that you would be back ASAP. Meanwhile, I was looking into other possible routes to locate Soares."

"And have you?"

Another shrug. "Somewhat. I figured it was better than telling him I was at your place holding your hair." Scully grimaced at the evoked image and tried not to laugh. His expression sobered after a few seconds, and he returned the conversation to the original subject with, "Suffice to say that Mr. X will not be in the loop on this one."

"That's a given, although I'd like to 'ask' him a few questions we've both wanted answers to for some time." She took a long drink from the cow-human mixture in her cup and felt the itch in her mind and stomach soothe to a mild presence. Once she had resigned herself to the necessity for survival, the thought of human blood in her diet became less nauseating. *At least it's not taking up space in a hazardous*

waste facility, threatening other lives.

"Among others," Mulder added, one in particular foremost in his mind, so much so that his nostrils twitched at the imaginary stench of cigarette smoke.

"Speaking of questions and answers, I want you to see something." She led him into the bedroom and showed him the ruined mattress. "Do you know what caused these perforations?"

"Not what, who," he replied, lifting a hand and crooking the fingers.

She made the implied connection, but shook her head in bemusement. "Why would I do that? I don't remember any dreams bad enough to that kind of damage." Splaying her hand to align it with the holes, she found to her dismay that her fingertips slid into the punctures, confirming his assertion.

"You were having spasms caused by what Knight calls your 'transitional state', and it looks like you haven't learned your own strength yet."

"What else has he told you?" She left the rest---"that you haven't told me"---unspoken.

He caught it in the tone, however. "Well, up until now, you were either disinclined to listen or in no shape for a briefing." When she did not rise to the bait, he continued. "From what he's remembered and Dr. Lambert has been able to piece together from her observations, fledgling vampires are sort of in a combination larval-pupal stage during the first few days. Your body is remaking itself to fit the new paradigm: casting off unnecessary chemicals from your metabolism, manufacturing new ones, shutting down certain systems, augmenting or creating others. It's using up the various nutrients in your own blood and what additional blood you take in to complete the process. Unfortunately, cow or any other food-animal blood lacks certain factors nec-

essary for your continuing health, so your body starts feeding on itself to stay alive---"

"---The way anorexic bodies metabolize muscle when they run out of usable fat. So when I reached critical bottom, I experienced neuromuscular spasms."

"Something like that."

"So, where did you get the human blood?" she asked, not sure she wanted to know.

He had expected the train of thought would lead to this point sooner or later when he began his recitation, and knew that leaving out any key information would cause problems later, but he could not be certain of her reaction to the unvarnished truth. A variation of it would have to do for now: "I brought in a pint this morning---"*but not on purpose*---"just in case you had any difficulties today. You drank it while you were in the middle of the attack. This should tide you over for a couple of days. Once the metamorphosis is concluded, the need should slow to something more manageable, unless you're injured, like you were today, and in those cases you'll need more. He suggests carrying a small bottle, like a brandy flask, for when you feel the urge."

"I could store a container in the lab refrigerator, label it with something that will guarantee no one else will bother it." Her mouth twitched. "'Alien Cooties', or something."

"Better be careful," he warned with a ghost of a smile. "You're starting to sound like me."

Scully rolled her eyes. "God forbid."

Philadelphia--11:21 P.M.

"I'm going out for dinner. Anybody want to come

along?" Mildred announced as she fluffed her short mop of sable curls in their suite's living room mirror.

"Where?" came Ann Marie's voice from a bedroom closet, sifting through her clothes for something suitable to wear. She emerged to hear the answer and see what Mildred had on.

"Oh, around," the former circus acrobat replied while she checked the outline of her lipstick. "Cruise the area bars, maybe. Haven't tried this neighborhood in a while."

"Okay, but no dance clubs; the music gives me a headache." In her mortal career---or attempt at one---she had been a band singer in 1934, and still harbored nostalgia for the quieter atmosphere of the old establishments.

"Sure, just shake a leg, huh? I'm starving." She spared a glance at the bathrobe-garbed figure bent over a laptop computer on the couch. "How about you, Sal? Care to go bar-hopping?"

"Sorry. I have some new investment histories Mr. Soares wants me to track before the exchange opens on Monday." She shuffled her collection of disks in search of a specific set of files.

Mildred's explosion of breath was more a disgusted snort than a sigh. "You know, I can't remember the last time you actually went out for fun."

"August twenty-second, last year. We went to see Tosca."

"You know what I mean." Mildred turned to face the smaller woman, her tone accusatory. "Have you just gotten too lazy to hunt, or is it because you're above hanging out with us?"

A threatening silence filled the room, and Ann Marie's gaze shifted from one vampire to the other. Ever since she had joined the group, she was all too aware of the tension between her two "sisters," and felt caught in the

middle. Sally did not have a forceful personality, and she always deferred to Soares, no matter what the reason or whim. She was the next eldest, however, and managed to make her influence felt among them through his authority or a redirection of the argument. This was a constant source of irritation to Mildred, who believed that her senior position in the two-person "object acquisition team" should have made her the master's second-in-command. The long-simmering hostility was beginning to boil over with Soares' decision to add a fourth woman, and a federal agent on top of that, to the group, and Ann Marie was certain that emotions would seethe out of control once the FBI woman arrived.

There was a five-second pause before Sally lifted her head to meet Mildred's glare. The smile she gave the younger vampire was calm and subtly condescending, her answer just heavy enough with sarcasm for the other to notice. "Why, Mildred, you know I've never been able to develop your...sense of adventure. Save for learning to work these useful little toys,"---she gestured across the computer, modem, phone and portable CD player---"I'm afraid I've let the modern world, with all its desires and... sensibilities...quite pass me by. However, if I didn't concentrate and apply my poor accounting skills so diligently, you couldn't afford that full-length Arctic fox coat from New York. That was what you had your eye on in that store window this spring, wasn't it?"

Ann Marie dove into the bedroom she shared with Sally---not because she liked the woman any better than she liked Mildred, but the elder was quieter and her feminine paraphernalia took up less room than the more appearance-conscious Mildred---in order not to be caught by the latter's suspicious eye. She had confided to Sally about the coat, little knowing that Sally would use it like a carrot to rein in the ex-trapeze artist.

It took a moment for Mildred to realize that her mouth was hanging open in astonishment, then she closed it with an audible click. *That old sow couldn't have known about the coat, unless... Ann Marie, the little slut...* Marshaling her emotions into something approaching casual, she said, "Coat? Oh, I may have seen one that took my fancy back then, and it would be nice to have for winter. Byron always said I look good in white. But, if it's too extravagant a price, I suppose a nice faux will be fine." She was lying through her teeth, and worried that the older vampire would figure that out if she wasn't blasé enough. The truth was, she had been just short of drooling on the storefront window the night she and Ann Marie saw it in the garment district. It was all the younger woman could do to dissuade her from breaking in and stealing it that instant.

Not out of fear of the police, of course, but of Soares. Theft for a paying client was allowed; theft for oneself, on the other hand, was swiftly and harshly punished. One exposure to direct sunlight had been enough of a deterrent for Ann Marie, but two had only taught Mildred to be more devious in how she acquired her extra trinkets and "pocket money". Soares gave them all adequate allowances for their personal needs, but Mildred's tastes ran to finer things than her budget could bear. She had been saving up and waiting for the right item to fence so she could buy the coat, and Sally's knowledge of it now put her in a dangerous position.

"Still, you two have been...working especially hard this year," Sally countered, deciding not to say "good girls" at the last second, "and I'm sure I can persuade Mr. Soares into covering the remaining cost for your Christmas present. How does that sound?" Sally knew she couldn't hide Mildred's sudden possession of an expensive garment from Soares, and an out-and-out gift was an impossible request, even if she felt the slightest warmth toward Mildred to spur

her into asking. The offer was a clear bribe, couched in kinder terms, from Sally and her employer to keep Mildred's greed under control.

The recipient of this potential payoff had not been stupid during her mortal life, and eighty-four years of vampiric experience told her that she was being led into this situation by the nose. Her lust for the fur, however, won out over her pride, which she swallowed. "Do you think so? It was awfully expensive." The false sweetness in her voice was almost obvious.

Sally knew to the penny how much the coat was; she had called the store the day after Ann Marie spilled the beans. "Just let me know how much you've saved by September. I'm certain he'll agree to the rest. Now, if you'll excuse me..." She returned to the task before her, dismissing Mildred's presence with a perfunctory attitude.

Mildred stared down at the muddy brown hair pulled back in a neat bun, wishing she held something large and heavy enough to bash in the skull under the hair. *No*, she reconsidered, her eyes shining green-gold as she trembled with anger, *both her pain and my pleasure would be over too quick, and then I'd have to answer to him.* Forcing her hands open from the fists they had tightened into, she vented her rage on the only member of the trio with neither the means nor the backbone to retaliate. "Ann Marie, are you ready yet?!"

"Coming!" The youngest vampire, dressed in punk/grunge attire and her pale blonde pixie cut streaked with pink and orange spray, bolted from her hiding place near the bedroom door. She had listened to the entire conversation while changing clothes, preparing herself for Mildred's acid tongue and foul mood once they were out of the suite.

Sally paid neither of them any attention, loading a

CD of "The Magic Flute" into her player and slipping on the headphones as the pair headed out the door. She settled back into the cushions and closed her dark eyes, ready to be swept away by the Mozart, when she heard a faint but all-too-familiar voice snarl about "...that pretentious bitch." One eye half-opened and the upper lip curled back, revealing a pale blue-green iris and bared fangs directed at the absent offender. Satisfied with her Parthian shot, she retreated into one of the few luxuries she allowed herself: music.

Dulles International Airport—
June 17; 12:00 A.M.

Mulder met Nick and Natalie at the baggage pickup area, and they kept the conversation vague until they reached his car. On the way to Scully's apartment, he updated them on her progress since his morning report. He had stayed with her until sunrise ensured that she would not give in to the urge to go outside, and then stopped by at dusk to brief her on the case and make certain she was well-supplied and busy with the work he brought from the lab for her. When he left to pick them up, she had seemed more interested in finishing a report than discussing her condition, so he assumed she was learning to accept it.

"Unless she's found a new route for not dealing with it," Natalie offered. "We had a case where the woman created a separate identity for her vampire self, and was able to function as a human when her original personality was in control."

"But she was operating with an existing MPD, right? That's not true in Scully's case. She may hang on tooth and nail to the most rational explanation for whatever phenomena we run into, but the physical evidence this time is a little hard to ignore, considering she's experienced it herself. Once

she's been convinced of something, she's not likely to let it go for convenience's sake. Any doubts that remain should be settled once you and she get a look at the samples under laboratory conditions."

"Well, I don't know how much new information we'll be able to get if she's already started to drink human blood," the M.E. reminded him.

He caught the mild annoyance in her voice, but did not take offense. "I got blood at the scene just after it happened. She's taken periodic samples from herself, and bagged the residue she appears to be secreting from her skin. You can run your own tests when you see her."

"'Residue'?" the Toronto visitors echoed. Natalie cast an eye in her patient's direction and added, "Do you remember any residue?"

Nick shook his head. "But back then we didn't have regular laundry days, and one learned to ignore specific conditions of one's day-to-day clothing. Frequent bathing wasn't a social necessity until the sixteenth century at the earliest."

"So when was 'back then'?" Mulder asked, glancing up in the rear-view mirror for the detective's reaction. When Nick hesitated, the instinct to seem human too strong a habit to drop easily around strangers, Mulder wondered if he had exceeded the limits of vampire etiquette.

Knight's mortal companion, however, settled the problem with a tossed-off "Early thirteenth century. Right, Nick?" She didn't look back to see whether he nodded, but brought the focus back to Scully. "It'll be interesting to see if there's a difference in the residue when the blood changes from animal to human." She peppered him with questions all through the drive, flinging a few back at Nick to get his perspective and taking notes the whole time. Hotel arrangements had been made, so once they were checked in,

the only items they took with them to Scully's apartment complex were the cooler and Natalie's "little black bag".

Annapolis--2:10 A.M.

At the main entrance, Nick wrinkled his nose in disgust and coughed to clear his throat of the offensive smell that was filling the hall. He recognized the substance, and covered his mouth and nose to protect them from further invasion.

Natalie identified it, too, and eyed her friend with concern. "We'd better get in out of this.

I hope the air in her place is cleaner."

"Should be, although...who would be cooking at two in the morning, much less with that much garlic?" When Mulder got within four feet of the door, however, he realized where the odor was coming from, and almost dropped his keys trying to get in.

To his immense relief, Scully was sitting quietly, albeit huddled, on her sofa, her stereo playing the London production of Phantom at half-volume. Images of finding her dead of self-induced allium asphyxiation evaporated, and he tried to sound calmer than he felt when he asked, "Hey, Scully, what's up with the garlic?"

Her shoulders hunched tighter, and she mumbled, "Needed to go out...didn't dare, so I sprayed the door and windows."

Made herself sick doing it, too, I'll bet, Nick thought, his heart twisting in sympathy as he moved away from the threshold into the marginally fresher air of the living room. He noted the empty cup on the end table, a smudge of red-brown on the rim that he knew was not lipstick, and a plant sprayer nearby. *Oil of garlic and water. Just enough to keep*

her at bay. Poor kid... He approached the couch, and when he reached the back, her eyes flew open suddenly and locked onto his, the irises lurid yellow with pain. Her lips drew back, and a fanged mouth opened just enough to emit a low growl. Nick arched a brow at this territorial display from one vampire to another and wondered whether she was defending her home or her blood supply. *And which supply?* he added, casting a glance from the cooler to her partner.

Their exchange did not escape Mulder's notice, but he made no mention of it. "Okay...well, you remember Dr. Lambert and Detective Knight."

"Call me Natalie," the pathologist offered with an intentionally bright smile, adding her hand to the greeting. She had seen Scully's reaction to Nick, and concluded that distracting the agent with mortal courtesy would bring her human side to the surface.

Scully blinked up at the taller blonde, recognizing an ally and food at once, then pushed back the automatic hunger response and took Natalie's hand. "Dana."

Knight followed the doctor's cue: "Nick, please," and was encouraged when Scully did not refuse his extended palm. They shook hands, and he watched her gaze fade to an embarrassed blue and her cuspids withdraw.

"So, I hear you've taken a lot of samples," Natalie put in cheerily, opening her satchel and removing her stethoscope, sphygmomanometer, syringe and a few vials. "I brought a copy of my notes for you to go over, and as soon as we can get all this to a lab...well, we'll see. First, though, I'd like to give you a quick exam, unless you've taken your vitals in the past six hours."

"I got a reading around eight, when I woke up, and I'll take another before dawn." Scully accepted the thick folder and began to page through it while her Canadian counterpart examined her. Finding themselves superfluous,

Nick and Mulder moved the cold box to the kitchen and put the contents in the refrigerator.

"She'll have to keep a few things in here to maintain the illusion that she eats." Nick told Mulder softly, experienced in the keenness of vampire hearing.

"What do you have in yours?"

The vampire shrugged. "Not much, besides the bottles, but I don't live in an apartment building, and an empty fridge is pretty much expected in a single man's flat."

Mulder nodded. "Cultural camouflage, double standard and all." The cooler emptied, he closed the lid and set it on the floor. "I noticed the human blood you brought was contaminated. So it's true, then, that you're immune to bacteria and viruses."

"So far, although I wouldn't be surprised if these incursions into the rain forests and new developments in gene splicing produce something eventually."

"That should make it easier to glean from the blood banks, rather than waiting for the freshness date to expire on some of them. Spreading her sources is going to be the tricky part. Don't want to attract attention by picking too many eggs from one basket."

Nick grinned at both Mulder's reversal of the cliché and the keen sense of survival in the younger man. One would almost think he was the vampire, considering the way he's accepted the reality of the situation and the need to prepare. When they returned to the living room, Knight announced, "My...mentor---"he ignored the telling look Natalie flashed at him---"gave me the website for a supplier of blood products to vampires. I have permission to use his passwords to introduce her, but she'll have to set up her own account. One of the benefits of the computer age."

"Kind of dangerous, don't you think? Some 'Net surfer with an Anne Rice fetish stumbles into the chat room

looking for other fans and finds the real thing," Scully commented as Natalie finished drawing blood.

"That's why it's not in the browsing lists where one would expect it to be. I'll show you once you're online."

In a few minutes, Scully had her computer booted and jacked in through her server, then handed control of the keyboard to Nick. They looked away from the screen at his request to keep the access codes private, turning back when he said, "Okay, we're in."

The text on the monitor seemed innocuous unless one knew what one was looking at. The "HSS"---"Hemophage Supply Service" Nick translated---connected the "client" to any available "product source company" in his/her area, and all transactions could be handled through the service or between client and company. With a sheet of prompt notes in front of her and Nick's coaching, Scully answered the necessary questions and was registered as an HSS client. Pending clearance, she was told, an encrypted list would be e-mailed to her which she could decipher with the passwords she was given, and from there she could choose how she wanted to acquire her supplies. It was all polite and business-like, and the "voice" on the other end was very patient with the newcomer. It seemed too normal to be what it was.

"You'd think she was buying Thai sticks or Cuban cigars," Mulder commented, standing behind her chair. Unnoticed by anyone, her nose twitched and her brow furrowed at an odd scent that suddenly became very strong.

"Yes, well, blood is more than food to us," Nick put in, glancing at Scully for confirmation and getting no response. Still hasn't made the step to claiming the "v" word. Can't blame her: if she hasn't been outside, the limitations and the blood are all she knows/

"Is it a chemical euphoric, then, like the active ingre-

dients in chocolate, or is there some sort of psychic essence that's taken in through the blood?" Mulder ventured.

Detective and medical examiner exchanged looks of amazement, and Natalie was about to answer him when Scully interrupted with, "He gets these bizarre little insights all the time. I've gotten used to it." She sniffed audibly and remarked, "Does anyone smell something strange?"

"Besides the garlic?" Natalie replied, wrinkling her nose. "No."

Mulder shrugged and shook his head, and Nick asked, "Can you describe it? I'm picking up all sorts of things, even through the garlic."

"Some sort of spice, the kind you put in pastries. I think...nutmeg. I'm pretty sure it's nutmeg." She turned around in an attempt to target the direction of the odor, and came face-to-belt-buckle with Mulder, who backed up to give her unimpeded access. She stood and walked past him, then stopped. Changing directions several times always led her back to the taller agent, which confused her. "It sounds funny, but I remember this scent. I was asleep, in the middle of some nightmare where I was strapped to a hot metal plate, and then I smelled this, and then I drank ...warm milk from a glass that appeared in front of me...the pain stopped and the dream ended. Have you been hanging out in bakeries lately, Mulder?"

"Not that I recall." He looked from her to the other two in puzzlement, the hair on his neck beginning to rise at her closeness. Unless it was necessary, he had kept at least an arm's length distance between them since she had awakened, and even then he had not been sure he could fend her off if she came at him without warning. He thought he saw a glimmer of yellow in her irises and tensed. "Why?"

"Because it seems to be coming from you." She inhaled, eyes shut, then focused on his left arm when they

opened again. "In fact...." Before he could retreat, she grabbed him by the forearm and pushed up his shirt sleeve, popping cuff buttons in the process and revealing the three-inch bandage on his wrist. Her breathing became harsh with distress while she tried to connect her memories of Saturday's nightmare to the reality in her hands. Mulder kept perfectly still, a mouse within a cat's claws.

"Dana, it was an accident---" Nick broke in.

"Quiet!" she ordered, half-growling, then turned an angry but frightened gaze on her partner and asked in a hoarse whisper, "Did I do this?"

"It wasn't your fault. You were delirious."

"But why didn't you try to stop me?!"

Mulder's voice wavered just enough for her to hear in his soft reply. "I couldn't let you die, Scully."

She stared at him with a wide-eyed, frozen expression as fear, guilt, horror and gratitude ricocheted through her for about five seconds, shattering any lucid response to his confession. She shifted her gaze to the bound arm, and tried to remember the other sensations in her dream.

One of them rose and overwhelmed the rest: hunger.

Not for flat, mindless animal blood, or the stale, re-warmed human kind tasting of the plastic bag, but fresh and hot and singing with emotions and thoughts. Her eyes closed in pleasure, and she breathed the sweet spice of the mortal standing before her. All thought of the others in the room faded away as she smiled, imagining the bliss that would fill them both when she plunged her teeth into his neck and took the blood she needed to heal her and make them one. She would bring him into the cool darkness with her, and they would live forever. He would understand, when he awoke, why she did what she had to do....

"Dana? Are you all right?" Nick inquired, her long silence making him uneasy.

His voice jolted her from her musings, and vivid amber eyes fixed on the challenger for her rightful prey while taut lips pulled back from fully-sprouted fangs and she tightened her grip on the human's arm, ready to pull him to her.

"Mine," she hissed.

Time crystallized in the apartment, freezing Natalie's "Oh, God, Nick...." to a gasped murmur. Knight paused in mid-crouch, afraid that intervening too soon might shatter the fledgling's wavering sanity and leave a mad beast in a woman's form, and waiting too long would be fatal to Mulder.

The fulcrum in this deadlocked seesaw, trying hard not to struggle free of his captor and provoke her into an attack, broke the tableau with two words: "Scully, don't...."

A fiery glare locked onto him again, and he could see no trace of his partner in the creature that studied him now. She rumbled low in her throat at first, then the sound escalated into a snarl. He tried to look away, to signal for help, but found himself entranced by the shining eyes and felt his will melting in their light. "Scully?" he pleaded, his voice barely audible.

Something flickered on the monster's face, then a larger ripple followed two breaths later that cascaded through her entire body. She did not blink, but Mulder saw recognition of him in her still-vampiric countenance and the fight to regain control behind it. Releasing his arm, she stepped back a pace, shot a desperate glance at Nick and Natalie, then ran for the front door.

And found Knight barring her way. He had deduced from her look of both shame and need that she would bolt for the freedom and anonymity of the night outside, and knew what would happen once she reached the open air. She tried to slip past him, but he grabbed her by the upper arms and pinned her to the wall. Writhing wildly, she bared her teeth

and yowled at him. He avoided or ignored the kicks she aimed at his shins and knees and roared in her face, his own eyes a fiery yellow-orange. When that seemed to intimidate her, he switched to a more human form of communication. "If you want to live, child, you will do as I tell you. Understand?" No reply, but she stopped resisting and stared up at him. He continued, his voice still rough but somewhat calmer. "I can help you, but you must trust me. I cannot teach you how to survive when you still deny what you are." For an instant, he imagined LaCroix laughing at Nick's use of the older vampire's words to convince another what he himself had reviled for so long.

"What do you know?!" she snapped, her voice guttural. "You don't know anything about me or what I think!"

"I know your type. You ignore what's in front of you because it doesn't fit the narrow box of science and give excuses for what you can't ignore. This mindset has kept us safe a long time, but it's a lonely existence, and it's even lonelier when you shut yourself off from your own kind." He cast about for a less-threatening venue to continue the discussion, and hit upon a likely spot. "Where's your bedroom?" Her gaze shifted, out of habit, in that direction. Before she could refuse to tell him, however, he pulled her away from the wall and headed down the short hall, explaining when she dug in her heels, "We need a quiet place, away from this stench."

She gave in at that point and followed a few steps, but stopped at the living room doorway and asked the tall figure, still standing where she had left him, "Mulder, why didn't you?"

The target of her question did not react, but Natalie winced at the ache in those words and moved to tend to the mortal partner as Nick and Scully vanished into the bedroom. *Well, that went well.* She laid a hand on his arm and

felt the muscles tense, awaiting another blow. *He heard that....* "Mulder, it's Natalie. I think it might be best if you sat down. You don't look too steady on your feet."

He teetered a little, then came back to himself with a dry, cracked-voice attempt at a chuckle and a tossed-off "No kidding." Collapsing onto the sofa, he leaned forward and buried his head in his hands.

She watched his shoulders rise and fall in a series of forced deep breaths, which broke off in a long shudder that was part of coming down from shock. Deciding some hot tea would help, she went to the kitchen. *No time for a properly brewed cup, so a bag in nuked water will have to do.* While the tea steeped, she returned to the living room to keep the shaken American company, taking a seat in an armchair. *He may not want to talk, but he needs to know someone's here. I've faced a half-starved vampire before, but Nick was no fledgling, and he had enough control to remember who I was. She's still walking the tightrope and, from what I've heard and seen so far, if she falls, I'm afraid he'll go with her, whether he wants to or not.* "How are you feeling now?" she asked in a gentle tone.

He did not reply at once, but a heavy sigh warned her before he spoke. "Like I just got out of a cage half a step ahead of the lion." Another pause. "She would've killed me, wouldn't she?"

"Maybe, or brought you across. Fortunately, there was still enough of the human Dana there that she responded to you and took control in time."

"But what about the next time, when the vampire takes over and Knight isn't here?" He glanced up at her, the dazed look just beginning to fade. "What happens then?"

"I think....this may be the worst of it. If she was able to pull back, hungry as she was, then there's a good chance she can control herself once she's stabilized."

"Sounds like you've been down this road before."
"We were. It didn't....work out."

He heard self-recrimination in her voice, and he pressed. "Somebody you knew?"

Now it was her turn to hesitate, but she forced the answer out for honesty's sake. "My brother, Richard. He was a Crown attorney. I begged Nick to save him after he was shot during a hostage situation. But he...couldn't contain the need to kill, and Nick had to...stop him."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Natalie sighed, then brought the subject back to the present. "As for your partner, her initial diet restriction was a mistake, and that's mostly my fault. She'll need human blood for a little while longer until her metamorphosis is ended, then she can switch back to animal blood. After that, we'll see if the tapering-off regimen I set up for Nick will work for her."

He nodded while she rose to fetch the tea, letting his forehead rest on his open palms. When she brought it and set it on the coffee table in front of him, she did not withdraw, but sat on the cushion beside him. "I know how hard this is," she began, "to watch someone you know change so drastically, to want to help but not know where or how to begin."

"Yeah, it's not like there's a support group available for this kind of thing," he snorted, the emotions belying the effort at humor. His head came up, and he stared at nothing as he continued in a more sober mien, the despair heavy in his voice. "I don't know what more I can do. Every time I think we've got a handle on this, something else goes wrong, and I'm no closer to finding the bastard who...'brought' her 'across'?" Natalie's head bobbed confirmation. "Yeah. My connection's connection overseas just lost his access, so I've

got no proof this is the same guy we're looking for. She can't return to work until she's learned to deal with....this, and our boss has to be getting suspicious." He took a long, slow breath. "I need her whole, doc. She's...she's my partner."

Natalie heard the meaning under the hesitation and gave him a sympathetic smile to go with the light but reassuring squeeze on his near forearm that rested across his knee. *She's more than that, my friend, unless you have a different definition for "partner" down here.* Years of observing the varying degrees of closeness between paired officers had given her a sense of the depth of this relationship. *He's as much afraid for her as he is of her, and I know that feeling all too well.*

Meanwhile, Scully shook free of Nick's grasp once he closed the bedroom door. "All right, we're here," she spat, turning on him with hands clenched behind her, shoulders squared at attention and her back to the wall. "The smell's no better, but you wanted privacy. So, Obi-wan, what great truths do you have for my enlightenment?"

Knight stopped short of taking a deep breath to center himself, the odor of garlic still too strong to inhale without gagging, and went on the offensive. "You claim you're not denying what you've become. Well, then, Scully, what are you?"

She quashed the impulse of an obvious smart-aleck answer like "FBI agent," her years of exposure to Mulder having sharpened her skill for retort, and went for basic defiance. "A vampire."

"And what, to you, is a vampire?"

That got a raised eyebrow, and her tone changed to bored sarcasm, as if she were replying to an oral exam. "A nocturnal drinker of blood, a resurrected corpse, a monster from European folklore...is that sufficient, sir?"

"Sufficient, but mostly wrong if you expect to sur-

vive. Yes, we're nocturnal, and we drink blood, just like mortals eat animal flesh. No, we are not resurrected corpses. We are brought to the point of death, but not past it. And folklore is opinion, not truth." *How I feel about my own state is because of what I've done since I came across. It shouldn't color how she'll come to view herself.*

"So you're saying that what Soares did to me wasn't the act of a monster?"

"No. Yes, what he did in attacking and forcing the blood on you was a terrible thing. If your will to live hadn't been so strong, you wouldn't have survived. But we are a cautious people, and not given to recruiting every mortal who crosses our paths. Soares had his reasons for bringing you over, and if your partner hadn't come along when he did, you wouldn't be here talking to me." He let her digest that for a moment, then added, "Our nature, our need for blood, makes us predators, but not all predators are monsters."

"Tell that to the prey."

"Just so, but consider: as representatives of the law, don't we hunt people who are a menace to society at large? To them, we're predators, depriving them of their ways of life, if not life itself. It's the guiltless that we should leave alone. I haven't taken from an innocent in decades, and what mistakes I have made, I've paid for." *And am still...* "But many of our kind consider all mortals food, and for some, sport. Others, like me, no longer take from the living. When it comes down to it, you'll have to decide whether or not you're a monster."

"That may sound fine right now, but I doubt I'll be thinking any more clearly than I was a few minutes ago. All I knew then was---*Tearing into his throat and drinking until his heart stopped and making him enjoy every second of it...*---thirst."

"I know. I still have those urges, the need to hunt, to

drain someone dry. Certain hearts, certain bloodscents make it hard to resist. For those who do resist, it's an ongoing struggle."

"Like an addiction. Wonderful," she grumbled, sitting on her bed with a visible bounce. "I don't suppose there are any twelve-step programs?"

Nick almost smiled at the image, yet answered her seriously. "Not that I've heard, but..." An idea had taken root in his mind while they were in the hall, but what fruit it might bear would depend on her cooperation and strength of will. *Of the latter, I know she has plenty. Every new-made vampire I've encountered wouldn't have hesitated to drain a mortal within their reach. As for cooperating...* "There may be a way to give you some additional control over the Thirst: another exchange of blood."

"With you?" He saw the instant rejection in her eyes at the thought of going through the experience again, but she gave him a chance to explain with a disgusted "Why?"

"Something of the vampire's soul...essence, nature, whatever scientific term you want to use...transfers to the mortal he brings across during the blood exchange. It awakens the mortal's darker nature, and the less control the maker has over his own needs, the more pronounced the darkness. If Soares is the kind of vampire I think he is, it's no wonder you're having difficulties."

"So you're saying that your...'essence' might override his?" She gave him one of her usual "I'm-not-sure-about-this-Mulder" frowns.

"No. There's been too much changed in you so far. But, one of the properties of vampire blood is rapid healing, especially from vampire to vampire, and I'm hoping my blood might help cure your imbalance. Between that and your native self-control, you should gain the upper hand."

"But won't this invalidate the research even more if

we contaminate the---" Her own sharp gasp cut her off, and she squeezed her still-golden eyes shut in concentration. Images and emotions she didn't recognize ricocheted in her mind, waking the hunger in her once more.

"Dana, what is it?"

A few seconds of focusing on the alien thoughts and their point of view gave her the invader's identity. "Mulder...I-I can feel him...in my head...he's calling me..." She began to breathe harshly, staring through the door.

"It's the blood-bond. We can sense strong emotions in those we've taken blood from, and if the contact is long-term, we're able to reach out to them over distances. With some mortals, they can sense us in turn. Dana..." He repeated her name when she didn't seem to be listening. She looked up, annoyed, and Nick continued. "If you can feel him, he can feel you, so unless you want him coming in here to offer his throat to you, you're going to have to shut him out."

She nodded that she understood, her brow furrowing with the effort, and both could hear muffled conversation just on the other side of the door. Natalie was trying to talk Mulder out of entering the bedroom, telling him ostensibly the same thing that Nick had told Scully, and, from the strained expression on the red-haired woman's face, with no more success. "I can't...it's not working," she confessed, wrenching her gaze from the entrance and turning to the older vampire. "Why isn't what I've drunk ever enough? I had two full cups since I woke up this evening, and one of them was...human blood, but I feel like I haven't eaten all day."

"It's the transition. That, and you're still young. It's most likely why you had the urge to go out, too: the vampire in you wants living food, wants to hunt." He saw her eyes fill in distress, but knew the hard truth would serve her better

than sugar-coating what she needed to know. "And until there's a cure, this is something you'll have to get used to."

They matched stares for a long moment, her eyes bright yellow with fear and hunger; his, a patient but otherwise unreadable blue. Scully broke the silence at last by tilting her head to one side, shoving her hair back from the opposite shoulder and pulling her shirt collar open with a rough "Do it."

Nick fought back a sad smile at her assumption that he would treat her as Soares had done. *Ah, no,* petite, *I bring healing, not violation.* Sitting beside her, he took her by the forearm and gently corrected, "No, Dana, we do it this way." He turned it bottom-side-up and, with no further preamble, summoned the Change in himself and bit into her wrist. She cried out in shocked pain and struggled to get free, but he held on and drank. Memories---hers and her maker's---tumbled through Nick's own of his transformation, and he used those images as a sifter and barrier between Soares and her. *Like stepping between them to keep him away from her.* He did not recall having seen the other vampire before, but he knew the mentality all too well. *He sees people in relation to how they might serve his needs, and none of those boxes is marked "Equal". I was right: if he had taken her with him, the hell she's been through already would be nothing compared to what he would subject her to, and she's not the type to submit easily. He would either break her spirit, or be forced to destroy her.* When he felt he had taken enough, he lifted his mouth from the pale, bloodied flesh, licked it clean to hasten the wound's closure, then offered his own wrist. "Your turn." She gaped at him, stunned and disgusted. "It has to be done. I can make the cut for you, but it's important that you do it yourself, for you may have to do this to help another."

Scully swallowed, grimaced, then screwed her eyes

shut again and sank her fangs into the skin just below the base of his palm. Reflex caused her to draw in the fluid filling her throat, and a rapid collage of pictures and feelings burst within her mind. She clung to his arm, dizzy from the onslaught and needing something to anchor her in time and space while her awareness spun through three different histories, only one of which she recognized. She watched the newer of the other two began to fracture and decay, losing its connection to hers, and the older one making its bonds felt. *That must be Nick. It doesn't feel...threatening, or restrictive. More a contact than a compulsion.* The need for blood was still there, but it seemed distant, not urgent and commanding. She was able to sense Mulder a little through the maelstrom that encircled her, and it faded further the longer she studied it.

All right, Dana, that's enough, Nick's voice rang in her head.

Fascinated by the myriad visions and sensations, she withdrew reluctantly, feeling the ties loosen. Nick detached his forearm from her grip, cleaned the punctures himself, and lowered her back onto the bed. She blinked up at him, pupils wide and owlish.

"Rest a while until your head clears. I'll be back in a minute." He rose, feeling the room spin, but it settled down by the time he opened the door.

The other two were in the dining room: Mulder sitting at the table, shoulders drawn in and face buried in his hands, and Natalie hovering behind his chair like an exasperated guardian angel. "What were you doing in there?" she snapped at Nick on his way to the kitchen. "He was ready to tear the door off its hinges to get to her. Any longer, and I'd've had to knock him out."

"It was a blood-bond reaction. When we're in need, we can summon a mortal we've---" the look he gave Mulder

was apologetic and somewhat guilty--- "fed from before. She didn't do it on purpose, but she couldn't turn it off. It took a blood exchange to stop the calling. I'm sorry, Nat. I know this isn't helping the research any..."

"But you didn't have a choice." The blonde woman sighed, crossing her arms and slumping her shoulders in concession to necessity over desire. "I just wish we weren't learning so much about fledglings at her and Agent Mulder's expense."

"So do I," came a voice from the bowed figure. Mulder lifted his head as the pair turned their attention to him, looking even more weary than he had fifteen minutes ago. "Ever feel like someone grabbed you by the ankles and tried to play wishbone?" He didn't wait long enough for an answer, though, changing the focus to his partner. "How is she, detective?

"A little disoriented, but I think she'll improve once she's fed again." Nick opened the refrigerator and removed two full pint bags of the blood they had brought. Emptying the contents of one into two large coffee mugs and setting them to warm in the microwave, he poured part of the other into a glass and drank it cold while waiting for the oven to finish its cycle.

Mulder watched the routine as an observer for the first time, rather than a participant, and winced at the grotesque normality of it. Then the memory of being the equivalent of those bags rose in his mind's eye once more, bringing up a shudder. A slender hand rested on his shoulder and lightly squeezed it in a reassuring manner. He turned to glance up at Natalie, who added an understanding smile and a questioning tilt of the head to her gesture of concern. He responded with a deep steadying breath and managed a thin smile of his own, then reached up to pat her fingers.

Nick caught the exchange out of the corner of his eye, and swallowed an involuntary twinge of jealousy with his next gulp of chilled blood. Natalie was a grown woman, he reminded himself, and free to choose any sort of relationship with a mortal man. He could not give her the physical intimacy he felt she deserved to make their own connection complete, and that barrier had always been a source of strain between them. If the agents had been more than simply partners before, Scully's vampiric state had placed them in a similar bind, and Mulder would now have to look elsewhere for a lover. Natalie's presence was a perfect opportunity for the younger man.

The chime of the microwave jolted him from his morose reverie, and he removed one cup to test the temperature. Leaving the other inside to keep warm, he collected mug and glass again and exited the kitchen, oblivious to the probing look Natalie aimed after him. He did, however, hear her announce that, "I don't know about you, but this smell is starting to make even me sick. Where does your partner keep her cleaning supplies?" Mulder's brow puckered a little, then he shrugged.

Bachelors, she snorted to herself, checking under the closest likely place first: the kitchen sink. "Ah-hah!" As she had deduced from the nature of the apartment, there was a small arsenal of cleansers and tools in a compartmentalized plastic tote sitting next to a gallon bucket. Pulling on a pair of rubber work gloves while the pail filled with hot water, she said, "Mulder, if you're up to it, can you give me a hand with this?"

A now-human Scully, recovered enough to be sitting with her back against the headboard, looked up at a grinning Nick on his return. "What's going on?" she asked, taking the cup he offered her. The scent of stored, but not old, human blood made her insides somersault with anticipation,

and she chugged down a third of it at once.

"Nat's about to discover whether Mulder does windows," Nick explained, feeling a little more comfortable about leaving the two of them alone. *If there was even a likelihood of something about to go on, she wouldn't be recruiting him to clean garlic juice off another woman's walls.*

"Well, I know he can type," she chuckled, taking another large sip. The taste seemed less artificial than outdated human blood and had a sweeter tang than cow's. A sudden realization that she was making comparisons like a wine connoisseur dampened her brief good spirits, and a reflexive wave of nausea made her put the mug on the nightstand abruptly.

"Something wrong?"

"I...I just found myself enjoying it a little too much," she confessed, her hands clamped together on her lap in an attempt to keep from reaching for the blood again once the queasiness passed.

"You have to remember, for us it's..."

She cut him off with a raised hand. "...More than food, I understand. But, is this all there is to being a vampire? Yes, we're stronger, our senses are sharper and we have a greater lifespan than normal people, but is that worth the price of a blood diet, hiding in the dark and being sickened by a plant? Does the fascination, the allure vampires seem to hold in our culture become just a façade?"

"Fantasy is always more enticing than reality, and, remember, to the vast majority we <u>are</u> a fantasy. However, there <u>is</u> more to vampirism than what you've experienced so far. I wanted to make sure you were ready for it. Fledglings can be overwhelmed by their new senses and powers. Traditionally, a new vampire was bound to a master, who would initiate them into the community and teach them how to use their new abilities. Soares broke one of our cardinal rules

when he left you to fend for yourself, because an untrained vampire is not just a danger to him or herself, but also to the rest of us by revealing our existence to mortals."

"And what are the cardinal rules?"

"Those I can explain when they come up. First things first: I'm going to open a window to let some fresh air in and give you a chance to acclimate yourself."

"To what?"

"The night. The only thing more intoxicating to your senses is living blood, believe me. You'll get used to it over time, but it's too easy to be overcome at first." He started for the bathroom to get towels to avoid touching the garlic-sprayed tape, but she redirected him to the closet where her ruined bedsheets lay in the hamper. He tore off enough cloth to cover his hands, and she joined him a moment later in freeing the curtains and blinds. When they finished, he warned her to find a seat somewhere and breathe lightly and slowly. Once she had done so, he opened the window halfway.

Sound tumbled into the room and rattled around her head. Even at almost three-fifteen in the morning, there were cars moving on a nearby street, dozens of crickets calling to mates, the growling aftermath of heat lightning and a lonely female cat keening her availability to any tom within earshot. Scully flinched at the cacophony, covering her ears at the passage of an emergency vehicle's siren. Just when the noise became tolerable, a breeze swirled in through the opening and she was assaulted by a whole new range of scents smothering those in her apartment: the thick green of summer foliage accented with florals, stale trash left for Monday morning's pick-up, an industrial/automotive miasma that even the bay winds couldn't quite wash out to sea, and the faint smell of ocean skimming the edge of her awareness. She coughed the almost-liquid odors out of her throat

and tried to make her breathing more shallow.

"That's why we don't inhale unless we have to," Nick told her. "Now, the best way to handle the overload is to pick one smell or sound and focus on that. Once you've shut out the rest, let the one you've chosen fade into the background." She gave him an incredulous frown, but he pressed his point home. "You learned to ignore Mulder's heartbeat and breathing after a while, right? You were able to define his blood-scent from everything else in your apartment, right? Then you can do this."

"Okay, I'll try." She closed her eyes against distractions and drew air in gradually through her nose. Identifying the garlic made her gag and she had to start again, pushing past that odor to get to the others. *Old food...yuck...herbs and flowers and soap...that's the bathroom...roses from Mrs. Castorini's yard across the street...nutmeg, Mulder...* "There's a faint citrusy smell mixed with human blood that isn't coming from my cup. Is that your glass?"

"That's Natalie. Mortals have their own...perfume?...that a little practice can locate even under all the other scents they use on themselves. It's what we use to track them when they've gone out of range of our other senses."

The hard reminder of the reason for her new abilities was not lost on the young vampire, but she redirected the thought to more positive ends. "Well, I can always transfer to ATF or go out on search-and-rescue," she half-joked. Nick's dubious expression almost flattened the attempt at humor, and she shrugged it off with, "I have to find a use for it somewhere."

"That's true. On a somewhat related subject, however, one of our cardinal rules deals with mortals who know about us. If others of our kind learn about your partner, they'll kill him without hesitation. So, from the moment you

awoke to this life, you became responsible for him."

Scully snorted and crossed her arms. "I've been doing that since we were first put together. My original assignment was to observe and report on his field work and findings, with a sub-agenda of discrediting him and the X-files. Time and experience have altered my priorities to the point that they no longer consider me a reliable catspaw. Now I'm sort of a buffer between him and the rest of the public. Believe me, detective, after the people and things---and I do mean things---we've encountered in the past three years, vampires can hardly be any worse."

"I hope so, for your sakes. You're new to the community, and being under my tutelage won't cut much ice with many of them, since I'm considered something of an apostate for wanting to be cured. You've 'marked' him---that is, taken his blood, no matter how it was done---so that should accord him some protection. Once taken, his blood and life are yours to hold or dispense however you choose, and it's only that courtesy we grant each other that will keep him safe."

"Is Natalie...'marked'?"

"No, but she's under my protection, all the same." Scully noticed Nick's gaze flicker in the direction of the living room, and his wistful expression revealed much about Knight's relationship with Lambert. He returned to himself, though, and said, "Now, back to focusing."

It took some effort, but once she had control of her auditory and olfactory senses again, which he tested by having her isolate particular sounds and odors, he pronounced her ready for a trip outside. "If it becomes too much, or if you feel the Thirst coming on, tell me; I have a flask for emergencies. We may go flying, so you'll need to change to dark clothes..."

"'Flying'?!" Scully almost squeaked, eyes wide and

mouth agape.

Nick grinned at the reaction, a flash of a happier memory of Erica and their first flight together dancing across his mind. "Yep, flying. You don't have a problem with heights, do you?"

"No, not at all. Do we...you know...?"

"What?" The smile grew mischievous when he realized what she was probably thinking of, and he decided to let her squirm a little.

"You know..." He continued to grin and say nothing, provoking her into asking what she now suspected was a stupid question. "Do we..." She winced, then surrendered all pretense of dignity and blurted out "Do we have to turn into bats to fly?"

"What? God, no!" he replied, mock-indignant, fighting down a spurt of laughter as the trap sprung on her. "Wherever did you get that idea?" Scully pursed her mouth and arched a copper eyebrow in a way that he always considered to be an adult version of sticking the tongue out in retaliation, and he considered it to be one of Natalie's more endearing traits. "Sorry," he said out of reflex, his voice and expression belying his sincerity. "It was too good an opportunity to pass up."

Her lips relaxed, one corner bending up a trifle in admission of a good-natured joke, then she asked, "All right, so what else isn't true about vampires: silver bullets, crosses, holy water, calling animals, hypnotizing people, running water, having to be invited in, anything else?"

"Everything except sacred symbols and hypnotism is a fallacy. I'm not sure how one can explain it scientifically, but that's the way it is. Some mortals are resistant, however, and distractions can make it difficult to get a lock on them."

"That makes sense. We had a case where a man's

voice generated a particular frequency that affected the listener's behavior, allowing him to control whomever he targeted. I had to distract him to break his hold on Mulder. I disagree with you on sacred symbols, though, because otherwise---"she reached under the neckline of her shirt and pulled out her necklace, dangling the small cross for him to see---"I couldn't wear this."

Nick blinked in astonishment at the tiny gold object, his thoughts spinning wildly. "But..." He drew closer and reached out to touch it, pulling back when he felt his fingertips heat in warning. "This should be impossible, but you're...how long have you known?"

"Since....Saturday night." She dropped it back under her collar. "In your case, it might be a psychological aversion. Were you raised a Christian?"

"Yes, I...fought during the Crusades. But objects of other faiths cause the same reaction in myself and others. Even my master, who was a pagan from the Roman Empire, can't bear to be near a cross." He stared at the spot where it hung at her throat, amazement and frustration warring for dominance on his face, both giving in at last to resignation and loss. *I don't even have the common ground of exile anymore. At least if I was damned, I was with the rest of my kind.*

Scully caught the wounded look in Nick's blue eyes, and for a moment was at a crossroads for the right thing to say. When she hit upon it, she chose the words carefully. "Nick, I...don't know if this would help, but I always drew comfort and a sense of stability from my faith, and perhaps that's why this---"she gestured to the pendant---"can't hurt me. By that same token, all the death and pain inflicted during the Crusades in the name of what this represented back then is manifesting itself in you every time you see or touch it."

"You mean it's all in my head? I thought it was because we had found our own version of eternal life, and were cast out of the salvation promised by the cross."

A half-shrug. "Psychosomatic responses to stimuli can have extreme results. Practitioners in India and Southeast Asia have been documented performing feats while in a heightened state of religious ecstasy that would be excruciating to anyone else. In Christianity, certain people experience stigmata after achieving a self-hypnotic state. They meditate on the image of Christ's sacrifice to the extent that their bodies reflect it with corresponding wounds. Your memories of that time have left their marks on you through this symbol."

"But what about all the other symbols? All the other vampires, who haven't had the same experiences?"

"It probably relates to social conditioning. The folklore about vampires places them outside human society, and subject to the talismanic devices humans use for protection. All Christian symbols cause a reaction for you and any other vampire who lived in a Christian culture, and you've extended the same 'courtesy' to anything similar. Non-Christian vampires like your master may have transferred their fear of being an outsider from the old talismans to the new." A memory of their earlier conversation caused her to remind him, "Like you said before, 'folklore is opinion, not truth'." She paused to let that sink in, then added gently, "I think we both have to decide whether or not we're monsters."

Nick sighed, acknowledging his failed attempt to keep his own feelings about his condition to himself. "I think you've already decided you're not."

She shook her head. "I've seen too many monsters in history and my own life who use the status quo and other people's fears and needs to further their own ends, secure in

their belief that what they were doing was the right thing. No cross will ever deter them."

"So have I, but...well, it's different with us." He changed the subject. "I'll go see if it's breathable out there while you get changed." He closed the window while she hopped off the bed and shut the door while she searched her closet for appropriate clothing.

"She'll be out in a minute," Nick announced to the two mortals who, cleaning finished, had moved to the living room, where Natalie was explaining her research to Mulder. The lanky agent seemed a little less haggard than before, and was trying to follow the points she was making.

Minutes later, the last member of the foursome entered, clad in black jeans and a navy Annapolis sweatshirt, her hair pulled back in a hasty ponytail. Scully threw her I.D. badge and some money into her belt-pack, explaining, "I thought maybe we should take the samples and her notes to the lab and start the work right away, whether we go flying or not."

"'Flying'?" Mulder's reaction was more subdued than hers had been, but no less astonished.

"Of course," she countered in a practiced matter-of-fact tone, enjoying this rare opportunity to surprise her partner. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have taken Knight's statement at face value, but given the events of the past few days, her concept of "normal" had undergone some radical alterations. "That's why I changed clothes. Will this do, Nick?"

The detective nodded. "I'm not sure how it's done scientifically, but it's a cross between levitation and gliding. We can sense wind currents and ride them, or propel ourselves at varying speeds when there isn't any wind."

"Sounds like a self-generated anti-gravitational field to me," Mulder speculated. At the odd looks he got from the

Canadians, he elaborated on his train of thought. "I mean, you're talking about a life-form that's capable of physiological manipulation and telepathy, so psychokinesis shouldn't be too much of a stretch. Our government and the Russians have been trying to develop those abilities in humans for the past forty-some years. Can you imagine an organism that can do the same thing to a human body by simply inhabiting it?"

"You mean like some sort of symbiotic parasite, like the kind inside termites that breaks down wood pulp into cellulose so the insect can digest it?" Scully offered, the gears in her mind whirring furiously over the theory's particulars. The idea of such a catalyst seemed far-fetched, but she had seen stranger things than this whose initial hypotheses made less sense.

Mulder shrugged. "I admit it's not quite as romantic as the legends of possession by evil spirits, but it has its own charm."

To make certain that the hunger wouldn't arise too soon, Scully forced herself to finish off the pint that Nick had prepared for her while she and the others packed the samples into the cooler. Natalie collected her satchel and Mulder took possession of the box while Nick played shadow to Scully, ready to grab her in case she lost control outside, and they left the apartment.

Scully kept her breathing light and infrequent, her hearing focused on Natalie's heartbeat---listening for Mulder's was too much of a reminder of the close call over half an hour ago---and walked to the front entrance. Myriad sensations called to her from the other side of the double doors, but she resisted the impulse to rush out to them. Each of her movements was deliberate and tightly controlled, and when she crossed the threshold, she reached back for Nick's arm and wrapped her own around his elbow. *Here goes...*

She had experienced vampiric night vision Saturday

evening, but the range of colors in her apartment now seemed limited when compared to the spectrum that assailed her on the steps of the converted mansion. The trees shimmered with more shades of blue and green than she thought existed, and the concrete sidewalk glittered cold and gray at their feet. She kept her back turned to the hall overheads in the building and the nearest streetlamp, lest the harsh illumination blind her. Nick must have had his vision engaged, too, because he led her to a spot where foliage blocked the worst of the light.

"That better?" he asked, amused by the radiance in Scully's expression. *Like a child on her first trip to the Ontario Science Centre,* he thought, remembering his own visit to the interactive museum as more a trip of nostalgia than discovery.

"Oh, yes..." she breathed, pale gold eyes wide and head swiveling like a tourist to catch every image identifiable with this new sense. "It's not thermal...spectrometry?" She looked up at Nick then and saw the gradation of hues that shifted across his upper torso and face. She blinked in amazement, then turned to Natalie and Mulder for comparison. The color radiating from them was distinctly brighter and more varied. *It's because they're human, their metabolic rate is faster...* She looked at her free hand, noticing the difference between her aura, Nick's and the mortals. *I'm somewhere in the middle... changing, but still human enough...* The first tingle of hope since she realized that her condition was real danced through her nervous system. *I can go back, if we're able to find the catalyst organism and develop a counteractive in time...* She let herself become distracted by a wave of excitement and lost hold of the mental shielding that kept the other sensory input at bay. Everything flooded into her at once, and her knees buckled.

Nick caught her when she stumbled against him, and

she felt images and words not of her own making rattle around inside her while he pulled her up and took her chin in one hand. "Dana, look at me."

She moaned, trembling at the voice that shouted over the bedlam in her mind.

"Open your eyes, little one, and look at me," he whispered this time. Damn, I was afraid of this...Overload, and if she doesn't have a way to get clear of it, she'll never learn control. Just hope my blood in her will sustain enough of a connection to help...

To his surprise, she stiffened and hissed through gritted teeth, "Get out of my head, Nick," followed by the conjured picture and sound of a slammed door in his "face". His brows shot up in astonishment and he loosened his hold on her.

She regained her feet, but did not push free of him just yet, using his presence like a tactile anchor while she tried to relocate her focus points. Natalie's heartbeat kept getting lost in the din, so Scully gave up and searched for Mulder's.

The ease in which she found and locked onto it gave her mixed feelings, so she chose the flower garden across the street to concentrate on instead of her partner's bloodscent. Once she had both fixed in her thoughts, she relaxed a little and opened her eyes to normal darkness. "It's okay now, Nick, thank you. I...think I can manage on my own."

"Are you sure?" Natalie asked, she and Mulder having approached during Scully's struggle with her vampiric senses.

"Honestly? No, but I'll have to learn, won't I?" She waved off the other woman's gesture of concern as she stepped out of Nick's arms and stood by herself for a moment. "I can't just shut it off like a light switch, or turn down the intensity like a volume control. More like...trying

to ignore a dripping faucet, or finding the last few pins in a patterned carpet. The brain has to select these things consciously, then train itself to tune them out at will. Right?" Her question was directed at Knight, who concurred with a nod, then she turned her attention to Mulder with, "I guess this must be how psychics manage their 'gift'."

The agent shrugged. "Some do, some don't. The serious texts are more interested in proof of its existence than in the next step, which is development."

"Great." I'll bet you're feeling six different kinds of vindicated, she thought sourly at her partner. Is this my punishment for being the voice of reason for so long? What's next, we find out that this vampire virus was brought here by ancient astronauts? That the cure can be found in Atlantis? "All right," she said aloud, shoving the bitter attitude into a small mental box for later examination and moving the subject to Nick and the other reason they were outside, "do you think I'm ready for my first flying lesson, Professor Knight?"

"Sure," he replied, moving to stand beside and a half-step behind her. "If you'll put your arm around my waist, like so, and vice versa, you'll get a better sense of the winds." Once both were in position, he asked, "Ready?"

"Whenever you aaaarrre...!" To her credit, she only let out a small yelp and clamped her free arm to where his encircled her ribcage as they shot up into the sky. She had three seconds to get used to the sudden acceleration, then their ascent halted. They were just high enough so that she could see the blanket of lights covering Annapolis at night. *I've seen this before, but from a plane. It's different now that I'm actually above it, with nothing between the outside air and me. This is...almost like a fairyland.* "It's so beautiful. Is it like this over Toronto?"

"Yes. Different, but no less spectacular. Up here, cities become constellations, and we...I guess we're astro-

nauts of a sort."

Scully chuckled at the comparison, considering that they were at least forty feet above the trees with no form of external suspension. *And with no suits or tethers, or even a mothership... well, if you don't count the one below us.* The air smelled much cleaner at this height, and the scent of the ocean was stronger, coaxing her eastward. *How fast can I fly? Enough to cross the ocean in a night, navigating by the stars? How high? Can I reach the clouds, or is where we are the ceiling?* She glanced down at the now-shrunken street and asked, "Why did you stop here?"

"This is the altitude most of us take. It's under the level of air traffic, but above ground visibility and other night-flyers like owls, bats and bugs. If you're in areas like this, stay over the trees; in the city, over the streetlights. Unless it's an emergency, don't fly until it's full dark. Can you see Natalie or Mulder?"

Peering at the spot he had leapt from, she saw the shadows fade into shifting colors and two small figures looking up at them. The taller of the two cupped hands to its mouth and they heard Mulder's voice calling out nonchalantly, "So, I guess we'll meet you at the lab!" Nick waved to signal agreement, then they began to glide forward at about twenty-five miles an hour. Scully's shock at being aloft had vanished in the first fifteen seconds, replaced by astonishment that they were in motion. The moving kaleidoscope beneath them became too dizzying to watch for long, so she changed back to mortal sight before nausea set in. *Observation one: night vision and high-speed flying don't mix.*

The physical contact let some of her reaction bleed over into Nick, and the detective smiled to himself at his protégée's discoveries and ability to adapt. *So far, I think I'm a better teacher than LaCroix was for me. He often let me fall on my face before he said anything, and by then a human*

life was lost. She's had a hard beginning, but she learns quickly. I just hope she never learns to kill. "If you need to find something in the dark while flying, scan with your night vision the same way you would riding in a car. Don't try to look at everything at once; you'll get sick. Now, which way to Washington?"

She surveyed the highway signs and landmarks below. "Bear right, then head southwest along Route 50. That will take us into the Federal Triangle, which is where the Bureau is located."

"Got it." He picked up a little speed after making the turns, then gained additional altitude when they reached open country. "Okay, ready to do it solo?"

"I think so. At least if I fall, I'll only land on a cow, instead of through someone's roof. Either way, it'll make an interesting police report."

Nick echoed her self-deprecating smile with a teasing grin. "Well, you're a real optimist, aren't you? All right, then, first things first: I won't let go until you feel you can maintain flight on your own. It might seem like you're suspended in a wind tunnel, and it'll be rough going for a while, but with practice you'll learn to sense which currents will give you the support and velocity you need, and how to 'change lanes' when necessary. Ever been in a small plane before?"

"Yes, but not as a pilot." She tried to imagine what it was like to read winds the way others read maps, and her grip on his arm relaxed without her noticing it. She felt weightless, but something in her knew that actual flight was a different experience. "How does one do this, then? Levitate, I mean. And don't say 'think happy thoughts'."

He snorted at the Peter Pan reference, then explained how he summoned the ability. It sounded rather vague to her more technically-oriented mind, but once she translated

it into images she could relate to, it made some sense. She remembered her first bicycle ride after her father removed the training wheels, his hands supporting the Schwinn just enough to keep her upright, but giving her a chance to find her sense of balance and control before letting go. A sharp tingling coursed through her, and she buoyed up a little. That must be it, she thought with a flush of anticipation when a strong breeze pushed from below. "Okay, I think I'm ready."

Nick hesitated a few seconds, then let go.

His sudden release and side-slipping away broke her concentration, and gravity wrenched her downward. Her arms and legs flailing, she tried to recall the memory by half-chanting *Bicycle, bicycle, bicy---* and only getting the mental picture of the looming back of a cow, which then changed to the thought of impalement on a tree branch. *Oh, sh...*

Knight caught her before the vulgarity was completed. In turn, she flung her arms around his neck and held on tightly, gasping like a landed trout. "It's all right, Dana, I've got you. I won't let you fall...it's okay...it's okay..."

She gulped air for a little while, and shook for almost twice that long. When she was calm enough to speak coherently, she said, her voice still shaking, "I'm sorry...should've waited..."

"It's okay. I should have had you take off from the ground first, as I learned it. I thought this method would be easier for you. Would you rather do it that way?

"Maybe I'd better; I'll need to know how, anyway. I did get a brief sensation of what it was like, so if I can recall it, I should be able to fly, right?"

"Right." He landed by the side of the highway and stepped back. She took a slow breath and consciously invoked the childhood vision of her on the two-wheeler and the feeling of flight she had a moment ago. When the recol-

lection of the latter sparked in her neural pathways, she flexed her knees and jumped. A surprised, delighted laugh escaped her as she soared into the night air, and she looked up at the sluggish altostratus clouds that had been threatening to break into rain since late afternoon, wondering if the momentum would carry her high enough to touch them. Her ascent slowed, and she began lateral movement when an upper wind caught her.

Nick leapt to join her, keeping pace a few feet away. The glow of pure enchantment on Scully's face stirred a warmth in his own heart that he never thought would awaken after Erica's death, and he found himself mirroring his young student's smile. "Thinking happy thoughts?" he asked, and got a reply of laughter that was very close to a giggle. *Rapture of the air,* he concluded, chuckling as he took her by the hand and tugged her westward. "Come on, Tinkerbelle, off to the lagoon."

Scully snickered and followed him.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, Scully had learned acceleration, hovering, landing, turns and current-riding, needing to be rescued only twice when she misjudged the distance and duration of a prevailing breeze. Since Washington had been built on a marsh, there were not many structures above a certain number of floors, and no skyscrapers at all, so she did not have to worry about dealing with downtown's erratic winds. They made the turn from the highway to Pennsylvania Avenue, and she said, "The Bureau is in the middle of the Federal Triangle. Do you know anything about architecture?"

"A little."

She smiled like a tour guide setting up a visitor for a punch line. "Well, it shouldn't be too hard to miss. I'm told it's the ugliest public building in the U.S.."

When they got closer to the heart of the Triangle, Nick found himself agreeing. "I'd expand that to the Western Hemisphere, though," he added. He directed her to an isolated alley a short walk away, and they landed there. On the way to the building, he asked, "You and Mulder have been partners for...three years?" She nodded. "And he's always been interested in...unusual subjects? I mean, from what he's told us about this case, there was nothing to suggest that the burglaries and murders could have been committed by a vampire. Not even the way the blood was taken would have raised suspicions in that direction. So when he found you that day, any other mortal would have assumed you were dead."

"But not Mulder," she finished for him, her voice quiet and thoughtful.

"But not Mulder. He accepted the conversation between Peyser and me as truth, and he knew, or at least suspected, that what he was looking at was the result of a vampire. Now, he seems to be an intelligent, rational person, so has he always had this fascination for the extraordinary, or did working in the X-files influence him in that way?"

Scully clasped her hands behind her and took a preparatory breath before saying, "It's kind of a long story, but in a nutshell..." As they crossed the street, she related what she knew about the roots of Mulder's "fascination for the extraordinary," starting with Samantha's abduction and moving through the events, places, people and things he, and now both of them, had encountered in his personal quest for the truth. She was concluding the tale at the Tenth Avenue entrance, which led to the forensics labs, when it dawned on her that, had her and Mulder's positions been reversed last Wednesday, she would have done what Nick's hypothetical mortal had done. *And I would've insisted on doing the autopsy, and killed him without knowing.* Guilt swelled in

her throat, and she shuddered at the image.

Nick, wrapped in his own thoughts, did not see Scully's attempt to cover her emotions. He realized that he had misinterpreted the connection between the two agents as a professional one evolving toward a romance, even if not achieving it in fact. What he saw now was a self-appointed big brother to an equally protective younger sister. *Dana's not the innocent that my Fleur was, and rescue came too late to save her from crossing over, but Mulder and I can try to keep her from falling farther into the darkness.*

They picked up the Visitor I.D. that Mulder arranged for on Saturday and headed to the lab floor where Scully did most of her work. Lacking the collected specimens, Nick helped her take another reading from both of them and watched her perform a blood and tissue analysis. She finished the preliminary tests on his samples and was starting on hers when Lambert and Mulder came in. Natalie was shown the equipment for blood chemistry and DNA evaluation, and after a brief orientation on operating procedures, she began on the dried blood taken from the site of Scully's attack. The men helped them set up, observed for a while, then Mulder took Nick down to his office to show him the file on the thefts and what they had so far on Soares.

The detective confirmed that the vampire they were hunting was not one he recognized, but he did have a little background information from LaCroix about the man's propensity for stealing from collectors and museums and selling to other collectors and museums in a revolving pattern through the decades, beginning with the Renaissance. While it was not something that Mulder could include in his official report, it gave him a sense of vindication and an idea of what he was dealing with.

It was nearing 4:30 when Nick called it a night. "Dawn's not far off, and Dana has the farthest to travel. Be-

sides, I think we all need some time to recharge." He had noticed, and he knew Natalie would have spotted it, that Scully's partner was running on the last of his reserves. From what Nick could tell by watching the younger man, however, Fox Mulder would push on until the problem was resolved, or he collapsed.

The pathologists were clearing their respective work sites when Nick and Mulder returned to the lab, and had some news to report. Scully's blood was gradually becoming more like Nick's, but there were a few anomalies present in the older vampire's body chemistry that the younger had not developed yet. "It's too soon to tell whether that means anything," Natalie cautioned, "since we've never tracked a metamorphosis with science before. We may be pulling an all-nighter tomorrow." She stretched and tried not to yawn openly.

Scully looked a little more alert as she packed the remaining samples in the cooler, but not much. Knowing that the other pathologists and technicians would not touch a fellow agent's work, she sealed and labeled the box like any normal evidence and left it in the refrigerator for tomorrow night.

By 4:45, they had turned in the visitor's passes and were approaching Mulder's car. While the agent was unlocking the passenger's side, Nick announced, "You won't have to drive us to the hotel. I saw it on the way in, and Nat's flown with me before, so it'll save you a trip."

"Yes, and I can make my own way home...unless you want me to drive you?" Scully offered, careful to keep her voice neutral so he couldn't suspect her of compulsion.

He blinked at her, considered, then shook his head. "Thanks, but that won't give you time to get home yourself. I'll be okay. So, we meet here at...what...9:30?"

Scully reminded him that she would be late because

of her dinner date with her mother, but that she would join them later. He reminded her in turn of their 11:30 meeting with Skinner at Montrose Park in Georgetown, and they all agreed that the Canadians would work alone for an hour or so. With that decided, Nick hooked an arm around Natalie's waist and leaped up into the false dawn. The agents watched them disappear over the buildings, then Mulder asked, "So, how does it feel, flying?"

She breathed in and let out the air in a "whoof!" before answering. "I don't know if I can describe it properly. It's...beyond words. I can see wind currents...well, 'sense' them would be more accurate." *When my metabolism stabilizes, and I don't feel the need to drink your blood every time I'm near you, I'll fly you around the city,* she promised to herself. Aloud, she said, "The feeling is close to a lot of things, but it's more than any of them. It's a...a flying dream made real."

Mulder nodded. "I'm glad that you've found at least one upside to all this. I don't know if I could've handled it as well you have."

"But I had a lot of help, and I know I'll need more of the same while we're searching for a cure." They let the grim possibility of failure in that area lie unsaid between them; the few seconds' wordless exchange was discussion enough. She broke the pause with, "I've been meaning to tell you something ever since Saturday night, but other things sort of pushed it out of the conversation. So much has happened tonight, however, that I can't put it off any longer." A bolstering sigh. "I want to apologize for how I've behaved these past few days. Like you said on Friday, this hasn't been easy for you, either, and all the unexpected turns we've experienced plus my uncompromising nature has only made it harder. I just...I just wanted to say how much I appreciate what you've done for me. Not just Saturday, but all of it."

Before he could react, she stepped forward and slid her arms around his waist, murmuring "Thank you" into his chest. He hesitated a few seconds, then returned the embrace, and felt most of the tension of the night's events wash out of him. He didn't know if she was doing something through the connection of his blood in her system, or if her very human gesture sparked some hope in him that she was regaining her equilibrium and becoming more like her old self. At last, he gave up analyzing and just let it happen, allowing himself to float in the calm for a minute before opening his mouth to respond.

As he drew breath, however, she guessed the tenor of his reply and interrupted with, "And if you say something corny like 'What are partners for?', I swear I'll fly you over the Potomac and drop you right in the middle."

The hesitation was no more than two mortal heartbeats. "You know, Scully, I love it when you talk tough." He got a muffled snort in answer, followed by a squeeze around his ribcage, then she stepped away and turned quickly without looking up. "Hey..."

"What?" She paused, but did not glance back. The nervous, almost impatient tinge in her voice would be clue enough for him: the brief closeness had awakened the hunger, and she felt the vampire rising. *I've just now gotten you to trust me again...I don't want to spoil the moment by letting you see me like this...*

"See you tonight." He knew she had taken a big risk, but didn't want to talk about it just now.

"Right." She could not manage a longer reply with the fangs affecting her speech, but she did sound calmer. Adding "Drive carefully," she pushed off from the sidewalk and flew past the streetlights, turning north once she reached sufficient altitude.

Mulder watched her change direction, took in and

released a deep breath, then climbed into the car and, radio volume cranked up high enough to keep him awake but not get him pulled over for disturbing the peace, headed home.

FBI Headquarters—June 17; 11:15 P.M.

Mulder caught up with Scully inside the Tenth Avenue lobby. "So, how was dinner?" he asked, walking half a step behind her on their way to the parking garage.

"Oh, just full of surprises." Her voice was laden with weary sarcasm, but she did not elaborate until they reached his vehicle. "Nick will be interested to know that my neighbors heard our little standoff in the front hall, but the consensus was that it must have been stray animals fighting over the garbage cans."

"'Garbage'? Well, that bolsters my self-esteem."

"Wait, it gets better. I met my mother at the front of the restaurant, and...well, let's just say it was a good thing I brought a carry bottle of 'soup' along, and the restroom wasn't far from our table. TV-induced paranoia was one thing, but I don't think Mom could've kept me from attacking her if I hadn't brought supplies with me." She held up and shook one full and one almost empty bottle. "I presumed I'd be okay; it must have been the restaurant crowd. Too many heartbeats, too much blood in one place, I guess. Anyway, to top it all off, she confronted me in the parking lot afterward and wanted to know if I was on some strange diet. Practically accused me of anorexia." She caught the quizzical lift of an eyebrow as they got into the car. "I'd put a plastic bag in my purse and palmed pieces of the rare steak I'd ordered into it. I found that my stomach couldn't process even that kind of solid food, so I pretended to eat and planned to get rid of the steak later."

"But you didn't count on her spotting the sleight-of-

hand trick," he finished for her, pulling out of the parking space.

"No. I had to do some fast talking about a touch of intestinal flu and not wanting her to worry, but I don't think it convinced her."

Mulder said nothing until they reached the street, then ventured, "Do you think you might have to tell her?"

"I hope not. It'll depend on how long it takes to develop a cure, if there is one out there."

"Dr. Lambert seems to think so, especially with all of our lab hardware at her disposal. Nothing like a federal budget to give science a creative boost."

"Good," she commented with no enthusiasm, leaning her head against the window and staring at the passing traffic.

Mulder's first instinct was to offer some words of reassurance, but decided that, in her present mood, she might consider them patronizing. Halfway to their destination, however, he let his right hand drop from the wheel and rest on the island between the front seats.

Several minutes passed before she glanced in that direction, and half of another before the meaning became clear. A tiny smile tugged at her mouth, and she reached over and patted the hand lightly. Its owner gave a mental sigh of relief and mirrored her expression.

Montrose Park, Georgetown

Assistant Director Walter Skinner was standing at the park entrance, watching the agents pull up next to his car and get out. He noted that Scully seemed a bit paler than normal, but did not appear to be sick. "I trust you're feeling better, Agent Scully?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, suddenly anxious about how to explain her actual condition. She had rehearsed more than one approach, but when confronted with the deed itself,

she realized how outlandish her report would seem to their by-the-book supervisor. A week ago, she would never have believed it.

He nodded acknowledgement, then got to the point. "Agent Mulder said you wanted this after-hours meeting, away from the office, because you had information related to the Soares case."

"Yes, sir. The information is of an unusual nature, and my involvement in this case has taken a turn that I feel is going to change my day-to-day relationship with the Bureau."

"Are you asking to go undercover? Couldn't this have waited until tomorrow morning?"

"No, sir, I..." She faltered, flicked a look at Mulder, then decided to plunge ahead with her original explanation. "Last Wednesday, while we were at Mr. Soares' residence, I was assaulted by the suspect and exposed to what we believe to be an organism that alters the DNA of its new host. Over the past few days, my metabolism has changed radically. Physical strength and speed has increased to a minimum factor of five; night vision is enhanced to the point that I can see into the infrared end of the spectrum, while ultraviolet light is not only difficult to tolerate, but also causes second to fourth degree burns on the skin. My auditory and olfactory senses have become acute, which seem to be necessary to the survival of the organism. In addition to the photosensitivity, I find myself limited to a rather singular diet..."

When she paused a few beats too long, Skinner jumped into the opening. "Such as?"

Her initial resolve to be honest with him warred with the vampire's instinct to hide from mortal awareness, then the latter retreated. *If this doesn't work, I can compel him to forget. But then what would I do? Maybe if I redirect the focus of the need...* "It seems that the organism requires

blood to function within the host."

Her supervisor's expression froze in a mixture of disbelief and suspicion, shifting in a few eyeblinks to official neutrality. "Are you talking about transfusions?"

She swallowed. "No, sir. I wish I were."

"Maybe you can," Mulder suggested. "We haven't tried that, yet."

Skinner shot the other agent a hard look, then glanced back at Scully. "Not human blood." The statement was less a question than a chance to insert a little normalcy into her confession.

"Sometimes. At first it was cow blood, and I still drink that, but...now I have access to discarded donations." *This is not going well, but what did I expect?*

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" When parts of her account began to sound strange, Skinner surmised that either the pair was playing an inappropriate practical joke, or his occasional decision to separate them to save the integrity of the X-Files had been neglected one too many times, and Scully was turning into a carbon copy of her partner. The way she tried to soft-pedal the "evidence" and the real distress in her eyes when she nodded, however, told a different story. *Can she really believe what she's saying?* Falling back on habit, for lack of a better response, he asked, "Do you have any proof to back this claim?"

"Thought you'd never ask," Mulder half-whispered, turning his gaze elsewhere when Skinner frowned at him.

You're not being much help, partner. "I have documentation of my blood chemistry and other metabolic changes, taken by me and another doctor who's been studying this condition for some time." She handed him a folder containing the data on her so far, with the comparisons to Nick deleted. *I just hope he doesn't ask who her research subjects are.*

Skinner glanced at the neatly-written charts full of technical jargon, then gave the report back to her with a slight shake of his head, instinctive red-alerts beginning to sound in his mind. "A doctor could make sense of this, but since I'm not..."

"I understand." She pulled her stethoscope from her purse and offered it to him. "Have you ever listened to a heartbeat through this?" He nodded, and she took the disk and tucked it inside her blouse, pressing it hard against the skin. He put the earpieces in place and listened, a look of consternation crossing his face when he heard nothing. "It's there, just very slow. You can compare it to your own if you want to make sure the device is working." She suspected that would have been his first thought, because she knew it would have been hers.

What was racing through his mind, however, was something totally different. Unlike Mulder, Skinner's sense of reality did not like to wander into areas beyond the official boundaries, even when confronted with the evidence of his own experience. He was always more comfortable with Scully's explanation of the phenomena the pair had encountered in their investigations, because it confirmed for him that the universe had defined limits, and it made it easier to explain to the higher-ups. To have practical, level-headed Agent Dana Scully announce with a straight face that, not only did vampires exist, but she had become one, shook him to his foundation. Defense mechanisms kicked on in reflex, and he began to edge toward his car, all but throwing the stethoscope at its owner. "Look, I don't know why you're telling me this..."

Scully noticed the triphammer heartbeat and the overscent of adrenaline in his blood seconds before he took his first step and, frustrated by his refusal to accept the truth, lashed out for his arm. Slender fingers circled the muscular

wrist and clamped shut, threatening to crack bone if they tightened any further.

Skinner tugged instinctively, then tried to twist free of her grasp. She held on with no apparent effort, her feet not even planted against his resistance. Staring up at him with glacial blue eyes---he thought he saw a hint of another color, but decided it was a trick of the lighting---she snapped, "I want you to listen." With no more warning than she had given when she grabbed him, she let go. He had just enough time to register that fact when she stepped closer, placed both hands on either side of his rib cage and picked him up like a basket of laundry. Holding him aloft for no more than three breaths, she added, "I want you to believe me." Not waiting for a reply, she set him down with a thump and vanished, reappearing yards away with her back to both men. "Is that proof enough?" she asked, her voice harsh.

Mulder watched the taller man waver slightly on his feet, his eyes closing against the memory of the last twenty seconds, then opening again to look at his bruising wrist. They exchanged brief glances: Skinner's expression was a sequence of confusion, alarm and accusation, while Mulder's was expectant but otherwise unreadable. The latter redirected the "conversation" by shifting his gaze to the other participant in the evening's discussion.

Skinner noticed that Scully had not moved from where she had stopped, her arms crossed tightly in front and her shoulders hunched in misery. His mouth twitched---a flash of indecision between professional distance and professional loyalty---and he sighed, his own broad shoulders slumping almost imperceptibly. Adjusting his glasses further up his nose with one hand and resting the other on his hip, he said at last, "All right, what do you want me to do?"

Scully's relaxation was visible even at that distance. "Well, for starters, we can pretty much count on me not

making any day meetings." She paused to let Skinner process that before going on. "As I mentioned, I can procure my own...supplies without going through public channels, but there may be some strange requisitions later on. We're researching the possibility of a treatment that would reverse the effects."

"The other doctor?" His attention switched back to Mulder. "Was this your request for the Visitor's Passes the other day?" The agent nodded. "Does he think such a treatment exists?"

"She's been working on it for the past six years," Scully put in. "We think the Bureau's lab equipment might give us a better chance at determining the organism's weak spot...if it has one."

A brief silence, then, "I'll do what I can. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment, sir." She heard steps behind her, but did not turn, knowing Mulder's sound and scent. He held out a bottle, and she looked up as she took it, ocher eyes still smoldering from the display of anger and her overall sour mood. *You knew why I couldn't face him...I tried so hard not to scare him off, and look what happened...*

Mulder did not react to the vampire, and part of him wondered if that was a good sign or not. *Maybe I'm just getting used to it.* He walked back toward Skinner while she tilted her head back to drink, giving her the time and space to compose herself. The director gestured him to come closer, backpedaling a few feet at the agent's approach. Mulder guessed the intent and pointed to an area several yards beyond Skinner's location. When they reached the spot, he explained, his voice a stage-whisper, "I can't guarantee that this is out of her range, but we're probably safe enough." He positioned himself so that he could keep an eye on his partner over Skinner's shoulder without being obvi-

ous about it.

Skinner cast a corner-of-the-eye glance behind him, then refocused his attention on Mulder. "All right, suppose you tell me exactly what happened in Philadelphia."

"Well..." Sticking to what he saw and heard on that day, Mulder related the entire incident. Once, he noticed the other man eyeing his neck and tilted his head back a little and to either side and inquired, "Checking for hickies?" Skinner started at being caught, frowned uncomfortably and nodded for him to continue.

When Mulder finished, Skinner asked, "Has anything occurred since she...came back...that would lead you to believe Agent Scully's condition would affect her ability to do her job?"

Mulder waited just long enough to give the impression that he was considering the question, then replied, "No, sir." A fleeting motion where Scully had stood distracted him for an instant, then he met Skinner's gaze again.

"How much do you know about this doctor?"

"She's a licensed forensic pathologist, and I believe she's sincere in her intent to find a cure, or at least a way to control the symptoms. Let's just say she comes highly recommended."

Skinner considered probing further into that statement, then decided that he preferred not to go there at the moment. "Do you think Scully might be in any danger from Soares, or come under his influence at any time?"

"We haven't seen any real indication so far---" *Not since the blood exchange last night, anyway*---"and there haven't been any art thefts with the same M.O. reported since Wednesday night, so he's probably lying low. The townhouse had been reported empty since Thursday, and he hasn't been seen at any of his other known residences. Even if we had enough evidence for a warrant, I don't want to send

anyone else in on the chance he might be there. I've put out an alert to the realtors on the Eastern Seaboard for anyone meeting his description, but nothing's come in yet. She hasn't been left alone at night for more than a few hours since this happened, and he can't come after her in the daytime, so we figure she's safe enough for now."

"Presuming you could stop him if he did come for her."

"Well, we do have a few deterrents set up." *Like Nick and a bottle of vampire mace...*

Skinner gave in at that. "Okay, keep me posted if anything changes. Especially if she..." He turned toward where he had seen her last, and was taken aback to find nothing but the bottle on the pavement, marking where she had been. He peered into the shadows, then rounded on Mulder. "Where is she?"

Mulder restrained the impulse to glance upward, saying only, "I think she's on her way back to the Bureau." He read the next question in the director's troubled gaze from their parked car to him. "As to how...believe me, sir, I don't think you really want to know." *...Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound...*

Scully did not bother to eavesdrop on their conversation, feeling that she had enough to be depressed about without hearing her boss blow a gasket over this little wrinkle in their mutual realities. She had drained the bottle, sating the creature enough to restore her human appearance, complete with the sting of tears. *I'm so tired of this one step forward, two steps back nonsense. Nick's blood helped reduce the craving, but it still pops up at odd times. There's a...deficiency somewhere...I can feel it. Did Soares not get a chance to finish what he'd started because Mulder interrupted him? Is that why I'm still in transition?* She had delved into the Library of Congress' online reference listings

on vampirism as a pathological condition over the weekend, and found little relevance to what she was experiencing. Researching the folklore aspect had been considered, then discarded. *I'd be at that for two months, and next to nothing of any use, to hear Nick tell it.* She caught herself fingering the cross pendant, which she did sometimes when she was troubled. *And, boy, does this qualify!* she thought, an ironic smile tugging at her mouth. *Missy, for once I think I could use some of that New Age psychobabble...at least it would give me something else to think about...*

Movement above diverted her thoughts, and she looked skyward to a wide break in the clouds. The moon was a few degrees past its zenith tonight, and Venus was trying to catch up. The part of her that identified the more common constellations, however, was drowned out by a more emotional *It's so pretty....* Entranced by the sparkling lights and a sudden return of earlier curiosity, she launched easily toward the clouds. She had enough presence of mind to take a deep breath and release it in small stages at the higher altitudes, but she knew she would not suffocate. *Just enough to keep my nose and throat from frostbite...Nick was right, we don't need much air...*

She found a thinning sheet of vapor and stretched her hand out to it. *Feels like I'm sticking my fingers in a deep freezer, but it's not dry.* She studied the ice crystals on her skin while her body temperature melted them, wonder loosening her tense mood further. *I touched a cloud...it's too cold to fly through one, but I can touch the edges.* Looking around, she realized how quiet it was at that height. Even her vampiric hearing could not detect any sound below apart from the constant wind. *This is as close to absolute silence as I'd ever hear without a pressure suit.* The perfect lack of sound stirred awe for such beauty, and she felt a sense of freedom she had experienced only in dreams. Even her first

flying lesson had not given her this feeling of transcendence. The rush made her giddy, and she laughed and did a back flip. She dipped over and under the clouds for a while, testing her cold tolerance and enjoying the sharper brilliance of the stars. Dropping to the troposphere, she practiced riding the currents, translating what she had learned from sailing with her family to use in the air.

Once she had a chance to warm up, she began to try high-speed bank turns, power dives and the occasional rollover. After almost an hour, she detected the presence of another vampire, and she spotted Knight hovering a block away.

Having learned to fly before the existence of aircraft, Nick watched the maneuvers with more than a little trepidation at the risks and a twinge of disapproval at seeing an ability used for transportation and hunting turned into sport. She passed him at one point, coming out of a wide backloop, and he chided her indirectly with, "Are you planning to try out for the Cirque du Soleil?"

She snorted and twisted onto her back. "Just getting used to the air, coach. You should try it, it's fun." She spiraled downward a dozen yards, then regained altitude and flew alongside him toward the Triangle.

The flippant attitude irked him, and he tried not to snap. "It's not supposed to be fun, Dana. We're vampires, not the Flying Wallendas."

Her smile thinned a little, but did not disappear. "I know that, but if and until a cure comes, I may have to rely on these tricks to survive. You think fighter pilots do this because it looks impressive from the ground?"

He sighed, conceding. "Point taken." They continued in silence for a minute, then he said, "We were wondering where you'd gone, since you didn't come back with Mulder. He thought you'd want some time to yourself."

"Yes. Today didn't start out well, then it sort of went downhill from there."

"But you seem in better spirits now."

"I think it might be part of the adjustment process. Losing control has always been a fear of mine, and being in limbo like this hasn't made it easier. But...I think if I can take control wherever possible, everything else won't seem so overwhelming."

Outwardly he nodded, but thought, A good endeavor, if naïve. It took me a long time to get where I am now, and keeping the vampire at bay has always been a struggle. I don't want to shield her from the realities of this existence, but she needs some hope, and maybe she can learn to control it better than I did...at least she has a more conscientious teacher...

FBI Headquarters--1:30 A.M.

Mulder ran into them on his way from Forensics. The agent noticed that his partner had more of a bounce in her stride than he had seen before. "So, did you water-bomb the Pentagon?"

"Not yet, but we're planning to buzz the White House later," she quipped back. "Where are you headed?"

"Natalie's sending me on a doughnut run." He turned an expectant gaze on Nick. "You must know what she likes. Want to ride shotgun?"

"Natalie"? "Sure. She gets the munchies when something's got her stumped."

"Better make myself useful, then," Scully commented, starting for the labs. "Anything different on the latest sample?"

"Not much. You're still fluctuating, but it seems to have slowed. She's working on the possibility of adrenaline

being the catalyst of change." He "saw" the scientific gears pick up speed in her head. "Sounds like the aging disease episode on 'Star Trek'." She furrowed a puzzled brow. "It'd take too long to explain. Go play chemistry set."

Since he had pulled more than one all-nighter in his office, Mulder knew where the nearest twenty-four-hour food sources were, so he drove to a doughnut place just outside the Triangle.

Neither man said anything for several minutes, then Nick made the first move with, "Dana says you've been together for three years."

"Yeah. Somebody in the Bureau decided I needed an overseer, and she got the job. We've led them a merry chase since then, and I like to think that I've subverted her somewhat to my side. How about you and the doc?"

"Ah...five or six years. I was almost a patient of hers. I'm still not sure who was more surprised: her to see me up and walking about, or me to find that she was more interested in treating my condition than being afraid. Since then it's developed into...an interesting relationship." A pause. "You know, I really hope Nat and Dana can find a cure soon, but if it takes a long time, or if they don't succeed, I want to be sure you understand that it's never going to be the same between you two. Nat and I have known vampires before and after they were brought across...."

"Like her brother, Richard." Mulder stared at the traffic ahead, both hands tight on the wheel.

So, she told him that story... "Like Richard. Something happened when they came into this life, and it wasn't the same with those they were close to. She may look and sound like the woman you knew before, but she isn't, and may never be again."

Mulder did not address that statement directly, asking instead, "In all your time on the force, have you ever had

a partner? A mortal one?"

"Yes, three." He felt a sharp pang of grief rise for Schanke, and a fainter twinge of guilt for his patrolman mentor in the Sixties. *And that's why I'm so cautious with Tracy.*

"Did any of them ever know what you were?"

"No." I couldn't bring them into this nightmare of mine, not when so many others I've cared for have come to ruin because of me.

"Why not?"

"I couldn't risk...well, part of it was fear and rejection, but mostly because there's always a danger to humans who know we exist, and those close to me seem to attract more than their share."

"Then you're as much in the dark about this as I am. The big difference between us is that I'm not afraid of the unknown. Awareness of vampires is dangerous, agreed, but so is knowing about alien colonization, shadow governments and psycho mutant hell-beasts. Compared to that, having your partner wake up a nocturnal bloodsucker seems almost normal."

"That's pretty much what Dana said the other night. But it's one thing to acknowledge the existence of vampires, and another to have a friend become one. This is more than taping curtains shut and raiding the blood banks for discards. Remember that close call yesterday morning?"

Mulder glanced once in Knight's direction to show that he had heard, then said in a quiet but emphatic tone, "I found her body. I brought her home. I fixed her dinner. I was her dinner. Believe me, Det. Knight, I know things have changed. I wouldn't have called you in the first place if I thought we could've handled this ourselves." Silence again, followed by, "So, speaking of yesterday, you spent a lot of time in that room briefing her on what to expect. Care to fill me in, or should I go to Natalie for the mortal's translation?"

Ouch. I guess I deserved that. Recalling what he had covered that night, he summarized the relevant parts, including the status of a "marked" human in the vampire community. On the way back, Mulder fired a number of pointed questions on the creation and culture of vampires, taxing Nick's memory and extent of knowledge.

Meanwhile, Natalie and Scully were having a more civil conversation. Since Forensics did not usually store samples of human adrenaline, Natalie had to produce some by running around the lab floor twice. When her bad knee protested the abuse halfway through the second lap, her small yelp of pain and stumbling brought Scully's near-instantaneous appearance at her side. Leaning on the smaller but stronger woman, Lambert cautioned, "Be careful where and when you do things like this. Nick says that humans see what they expect to see, even if they have to convince themselves, but I think he's been taking too many chances lately."

"I figured we were safe enough at this hour, but I'll try to keep it under wraps." A technician crossing the hall ahead of them hesitated with a look of puzzled concern on his face. She nodded and waved assurance that things were under control, so he continued to his destination. Once Natalie was settled in a chair, Scully drew a few cc's of blood and handed her the syringe. "Since this is yours, you should do the honors."

"Thank you," Natalie replied in a mock-formal accent and injected a drop on the slide under current inspection. Announcing, "Okay, this is Nick's...same old, same old...take a look." She scooted over to make room for Scully at the electron microscope, who curled a lip slightly at watching the tiny vampiric organisms invade the alien corpuscles. "They become more active after fresh human blood than they do on the bottled variety, and less so with animal

blood." She jotted a few notes on the chart, then changed slides. "Now, let's see what happens with yours."

Scully peered into the eyepiece again while Natalie introduced her adrenalized blood to the second slide. The organisms in her blood approached and attacked the new hosts, moving faster than before, the way Nick's sample had. Once finished, however, they did not transform into the same type of creatures inhabiting the first slide, but remained identical to the ones found in her blood after the exchange with Knight. She shook her head, moving back to get a corroborative opinion from her more experienced counterpart.

"Damn!" Natalie muttered when she had a look, scribbling on the chart once more. "What's keeping you in stasis? You've had human blood, stored and fresh; you've had blood from another vampire to level out the hunger. I was sure the sole difference between these bugs and Nick's was a sufficient infusion of adrenaline to catalyze full metamorphosis." She had explained before when Scully had entered the lab that Mulder's blood may not have contained enough of the hormone for the creatures to feed upon and stabilize into mature symbiotes. Mimicking a strangling gesture in the direction of the microscope, Natalie growled in frustration. "What is it? What more do you little buggers want?!"

Scully left her chair and went to the refrigerator to collect another pair of samples from an earlier reading. "Maybe something will happen from blood taken Sunday morning. If we can watch the evolution in progress, it could give us an idea where the change occurs." She stood at the open door for a moment, staring at the collection of flasks, bottles, test tubes and containers, and sighed, "God, I'm going to miss ice cream."

"So you have a sweet tooth, too, eh?"

"No, mostly cold things: ice cream, popsicles, ice cubes."

"You eat ice cubes?!" Natalie shuddered at the thought of ice being crunched between teeth. "Uhhkh, bet you were a lot of fun at sleepovers."

Scully shrugged, then found the vials she was looking for. "If you want to work on these, I'll finish up the residue swatches." Natalie took the tubes and set them in a nearby rack. While Scully retrieved her envelope full of plasticine bags, she announced in a matter-of-fact tone, "Come to think of it, I do like oranges." She paused for effect, then asked, "Natalie, did you know that you smell a lot like...citrus?"

"No, do I? That's funny, because my perfume doesn't..." Her comment trailed off when she followed what the agent was referring to, and she spun around just in time to see Scully arch an eyebrow and smile slyly before turning to her own work. Half a beat later, Natalie realized that the veiled threat was simply a teasing rejoinder to her crack about Scully's former eating habits, and she snorted in good-natured concession as she went back to the microscope. "Great, vampire humor," she murmured under her breath.

Scully's response to that was an evil chuckle.

The light mood faded to disappointment after the results of the present trial were known. There was no change in the organisms in the blood drawn before the exchange when fed the adrenaline-charged hemoglobin, and, aside from dead skin and serum containing enzymes unnecessary to a vampire's metabolism, nothing new could be gleaned from the fabric samples. Natalie sat back in her chair with a sigh of disgust. "There's got to be something we're missing. It's right in front of us, but we're not seeing it."

"Well, I was wondering earlier if perhaps Soares didn't finish the process, that Mulder's appearance had inter-

rupted him partway through."

Natalie shook her head. "If he had been interrupted, you wouldn't be here. Once the victim has taken enough of the vampire's blood, he or she becomes a vampire. And once the new vampire makes his first...oh, my God, that's it."

"What?" Scully heard the Canadian pathologist's heartrate pick up, and she felt her own become almost discernible.

"That's the difference. You haven't made your first kill yet. Nick said it was part of the initiation, but since you were left behind, you didn't go through it. That means the catalyst has to be somewhere in the bloodstream of a dying person."

"It could be one of the neuropeptides released in the body from the pituitary gland or hypothalamus during the last moments of life, like a beta-endorphin. It's why people claiming to have near-death experiences feel calm and happy. But so much floods the system at once; which of them could be the catalyst?" Both pondered for a few seconds, then she blurted out, "What if it's a mixture of several chemicals, released in sufficient amounts solely at the time of death? That could explain why Mulder's blood didn't invoke the complete change. There wasn't enough of the right hormones or other trace chemicals to complete the transformation."

"Okaaay, that makes sense. One problem, though: why wouldn't the vampire's own organisms just transfer to the new host? His blood enters the victim during the exchange; you had an exchange on top of that, but nothing seems to have happened in either incident."

Scully thought furiously on that one, recalling everything she knew of epidemiology and virology. "Maybe..." she said at last, choosing her words with care, "maybe the infecting agent isn't carried in the bloodstream itself, but in the saliva, in a stripped-down form of the known organism."

"And maybe it locks onto something in the human bloodstream, maybe a leukocyte, which then mutates and reproduces, feeding on the surrounding normal blood. The exchange might ensure that the victim will heal and, when they revive, feed to end the metamorphosis. So, in a way, Mulder did interrupt just in time."

But not soon enough to keep me from becoming a vampire...but if he'd come sooner, Soares would've killed him outright...or made me do it. Fragments of that Wednesday afternoon blurred with the imagined scenes and crashed headlong into the memories of Monday morning and the blinding need she'd felt then. Scully shuddered, her head ducking and eyes squeezing shut as she was swept back into the nightmare.

"Dana?" The bizarre reaction to her comment took Natalie by surprise and, instinct overruling caution, she wheeled over to her American colleague and touched her on the shoulder.

With the loud gasp of the rudely-awakened, Scully came back, bright gold eyes rolling ceilingward, then down, and they widened to identify their surroundings. To her credit, Natalie held her ground at the sudden manifestation. A shiver, a minute headshake and a long blink, then the vampire was gone. "God, what was that?!"

"You tell me. Do you need to...?" A wave toward the refrigerator, indicating the two pint jars inside, marked "Evidence" along with the samples.

"No, no, I'm fine." She put her fingertips to her forehead, concentrating. "I was thinking about what would have changed if Mulder had arrived sooner...maybe too soon, then it all came flooding in on me. Like a flashback, but not exactly. What happened the night you and Nick arrived, the attack itself, remembering the hunger...and something else. I had a sense of someone just outside, looking for me."

Natalie turned the description over in her mind, then shook her head. "Nick's never mentioned anything like that before. It sounds more like a post-traumatic stress reaction."

"You think so?" The note of guarded hope was palpable.

"Considering the mill you've been run through, I'm surprised you haven't had one sooner."

Scully looked thoughtful, then nodded. "That must have been it. Surfacing repressed memories can be overwhelming." Another, self-reassuring nod, followed by a half-audible "Yes."

"Okay, back to the original subject. Now, we can speculate on what catalyzes the change and how the organism is transmitted until the cows come home, but unless we can prove it..."

"...That's all it is: speculation. For starters, where would we get the necessary chemicals? It's not like we're ordering take-out."

"And I doubt any of our fellow oil-burners would be willing to volunteer. Well,

let's wait until the guys come back; a fresh perspective might be what we need. In the meantime..."

They returned to their respective tests, with few notable discoveries. At one point, Natalie broke the quiet with a casual, "So, how was your first solo flight?"

A distracted smile crossed Scully's features, and she sighed deeply. "It was the most spectacular experience I've ever had. Has Nick ever taken you up high enough to touch a cloud?"

"No, it's too cold and the air's too thin for us mortals. Did you?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "And it's so...the silence is so profound. I just...I can't think of the right word. The closest I came last night was describing it to Mulder as a fly-

ing dream made real, but that was at the lower altitudes. This is so far beyond that...no words could approach the feeling."

"I guess it's one of those things you have to experience yourself."

Scully nodded. "Maybe if you bundle up and take along one of those small oxygen tanks, then Nick could fly you with no problems."

"Sounds like a plan to me. What else did you do?"

"I practiced, tried out a few maneuvers: turns, dives, loops, spirals." She chuckled. "I'd made a comment about thinking happy thoughts the first time, and Nick dubbed me 'Tinkerbelle'. Tonight I was probably closer to Rocky the Flying Squirrel. He looked so scandalized."

"Well, he's sort of an old-fashioned guy. At his age, that's expected. Sometimes it's one of his more endearing traits; at others, it's damned frustrating." Lost in the memory, she failed to notice Scully's curious lift of brow at this confession, then a sudden burst of laughter broke her reverie. She glanced at the red-haired woman and put her hand to her mouth to stifle another explosion.

"What is it?" Scully found herself smiling in anticipation.

"I---I r-really shouldn't say," Natalie tried to explain, fighting to keep a straight face.

"You started this. Tell me."

"It's, ah...well, I mean, don't take offense, but it just came to me..." A rush of snickering, then she swallowed hard, coughed, and managed a coherent but strained "Rocket J. Scully?"

The snort, followed by peals of laughter, was assurance that Scully had not taken offense, and Natalie joined her in the hilarity. After that, it became sort of a relay, where one regained control only to be set off again by the sound of

the other. Finally, when both had calmed down enough to catch their breath and turn toward their respective microscopes, another thought occurred to Natalie: "So, what does that make Mulder?"

That was too much for Scully. All the stress and chaos of the past few days found release through that mental picture. The "Oh, God!" that erupted from her was almost a squeal, and she rocked back and forth in her seat, clutching her midsection.

Halfway through the renewed hysteria, Nick and Mulder walked into the lab. Seeing the agent, both women lost what little composure they had: Natalie laid her head on her forearm where it rested on the table while her other hand slapped out an erratic rhythm, and Scully slid right off her chair, wheezing.

"Must've been a good joke," Nick ventured, getting a shrug in reply from Mulder.

It took a while for things to settle down, but the news of the discovery made it worth the wait. While isolating the possible catalyst was not proof of a cure, and the likelihood of a way back for Scully still left no hope for Nick, the underlying mood of the past few days had taken an upward turn. In fact, Mulder could not remember the last time he had seen his partner this animated about a project.

Regarding the problem of a sample of the proper chemicals, several sources were suggested and discarded as either too risky---a hospital ER---or unusable---an anatomy lab or a morgue. Then, when obtaining the sample looked to be an impossible task, Mulder raised his hand and began, "This might seem a bit ghoulish, but---"three pairs of eyes turned on him---"considering the murder rate in this city, we could try to get some from someone...well, on his way out?"

"You're right, that is ghoulish," Scully concurred, her optimism wilting further under the harsh glare of Hip-

pocratic ethics. "Well, so much for..."

"I agree," Nick interrupted, "but we don't have a choice, do we? It's not like we're going to leave the person to die, and maybe if the amount is close enough..."

"What was that you said about a fresh perspective?" Scully asked Natalie in an exasperated tone. *I can't believe they're actually considering this.*

"I don't like it either," Natalie replied, let out a resigned breath and added, "but I don't see any other way around this."

"Are you serious?!" Scully stared at the trio, then focused on Natalie, astonished that a fellow doctor would agree to such a proposal. "Do you realize what you're asking me to do to another human being?"

"I'll do it," Nick announced. When his student turned to protest, he continued. "I was a medic for a while; I respect the Oath you took. But, there comes a time when the goal can be reached only by stepping beyond the letter of the law to maintain its spirit, like Pasteur and Reed did. I know how to use a hypodermic needle, so I'll not be hastening the person's death. In fact, by virtue of being there, I might be in a position to help keep him alive." He gave her a conciliatory smile. "If there were a better way, an easier way, Dana, believe me, I'd take it. But I'm talking as your teacher, here, and I'm saying we should do this. If not for our sakes, then for the vampires who want to be rid of their condition without being forced to walk into the sun." *The way Erica did, and I've wanted to do more than once....*

Scully stared up at him a moment longer, weighing his words in her mind, then closed her eyes and bowed her head, conceding the argument. "All right, you win." His next words, however, were cut off by her rebuttal: "But if this cure, presuming we can develop it, may just help new vampires like me, who haven't made their first kill. What

about you and the other older ones, who've already passed that point?"

Natalie jumped in to answer. "It might be a long shot, but we could use what we've found so far to create, if not a cure, then a treatment to alleviate some of the symptoms. At the very least, a substitute for blood."

"Believe me, she's concocted just about everything else in that pathology lab," Nick told them, sitting on the table edge next to her.

"Have you ever gotten close?" Mulder wanted to know, asking the question that had been shuffled around in his mind since the subject of a cure had been mentioned. He had looked at the research notes, but could make little sense of them, and while he felt Natalie truly believed the goal was within reach, he needed the assurance of some earlier progress.

"Once," the Canadians said in unison, then both smiled and Natalie gestured to Nick to go on. "It was some kind of...synthetic hormone? Right, for cows, no less. Hurt like hell, but it worked. I ate solid food without getting sick, I walked in full sunlight. It was great...while it lasted. Problem was, I needed more and more just to maintain, and the withdrawal got worse each time. Until then, I always thought I understood how drug addicts felt. This was as bad as starving, but the pain was a lot different. Hunger has its own agony, yet it takes you out of yourself."

"Like you're watching through someone else's eyes, and they're in control," Scully broke in, casting a meaningful glance in Mulder's direction when she remembered Frohike's visit.

"Exactly. But when my tolerance increased, all there was, was pain. And there was no way to get free." Natalie reached back and laid her fingers on his hand. "Then a case I was working on went wrong, and I got shot. The drug lost

its hold, and the vampire returned..."

"And disappointed as I was at failing again, I was never so relieved to see fangs in my life," Lambert finished. "Since then, we've been pretty much at a stalemate. All we knew was what hadn't worked, and were never quite sure why. Now, with this, we have a place to start."

"And speaking of starting---" Nick scanned the jumble of scientific hardware for the instrument he needed--- "where do you keep the syringes?"

Scully hesitated, rose and went to the supply cabinet and took out a hypodermic syringe and needle, then got cotton and alcohol from the first aid kit on the wall. Instead of handing the items to her mentor, however, she packed them in a large specimen bag, explaining, "You may have been a medic at one time, Nick, but I'm a doctor now."

"But you said..." The look of resigned determination silenced him, and he nodded, thinking, *She'd rather not do this, but we've got a better chance of pulling someone back from the brink with her along.* "All right, but be warned: spilled blood intensifies the hunger. We'll take what's in the refrigerator with us, but don't be surprised if I make you walk away from whoever we find."

She agreed, albeit reluctantly, and they collected what they would need and left.

Mulder waited until they were far enough down the corridor to have reached the elevator before asking, "At the risk of being labeled a wet blanket, what happens if the chemicals they're hunting for don't do the trick?"

"Then we keep looking. But, you know, I think this might be the catalyst. It makes more sense than anything else I've come across. I mean, we've tried herbal remedies, drug cocktails, synthetic hemoglobin, other hormones, weaning him off blood, even magical artifacts. Nothing's worked, and he's become more unwilling to continue with

each setback. Honestly, I can't say that I blame him. But I know that we're close; I can feel it." A pause, followed by a wry smile. "Does that sound a little obsessive?"

"Speaking as a fellow obsessive, yes. On the other hand, I can think of worse goals."

"True." A stray thought and a glance at his left forearm sent her out of her chair and toward the cabinet, ordering, "Roll up your sleeve. I want to see under that bandage."

"Why?" he inquired, undoing the cuff.

"I want to see how it's healed and find out if you have any of her organisms remaining in your blood. Vampire bites disappear faster than normal puncture wounds, which means the organisms in the saliva must have the same healing properties as those in the blood." Returning to where he sat, she unwrapped the bandage, now smaller than before, and exposed the tiny marks. "Good, there's enough scabbing to get a sample. Hold still." She snapped on a fresh glove, picked up a scalpel and pried loose a bit of dried tissue from the area. Transferring it to a slide, she readied the hypodermic she had taken from supplies and swabbed a spot above the injury. "I'll need a few cc's, so this'll sting a while." He hissed at the initial stick and looked away while she pulled the plunger back. "Okay, all done," she announced, removing the needle and pressing an alcohol-soaked cotton ball over the puncture. "Hold it till the bleeding stops."

"Do I get a balloon?" Mulder asked, wincing at the aftereffects.

Natalie grinned. "If this works, I'll get you a bag of them." She stained the first slide and put it on the stage of the microscope. "Hmm, looks normal..." A long silence, then, "What the---?" She scowled in puzzlement, then yanked out the glass rectangle and replaced it with one containing a smeared drop of Mulder's blood. "Nothing." Several more slides got the same treatment before she found

what she was searching for. "Okay, what are you?" Another, longer silence, and she chewed on her bottom lip. "Looks like...I'll be damned..."

"What is it?" He stood and came up behind her.

She did not reply at first, then sat back and stared at the microscope. "There's a cell I can't identify. It resembles one of the vampire organisms, but it has elements of the leukocyte we think the proto-organism bonds to. I just saw it pass up a red blood cell, something it would normally devour." Her eyes widened at a sudden brainstorm, and she drew a little of the most recent sample of Scully's blood and added it to the slide. A moment of peering down the drawtube again, then she straightened and looked up at him, her eyes shining with excitement. "I think we've found it."

"What?"

"The hybrid organism? It just attacked one of her vampire bugs and tore it apart. Your white cells are engulfing it even as we speak."

"You mean I'm immune?"

"No. If that were true, no one bitten once and surviving would ever become a vampire. What I think is happening here is that when the proto-organisms enter the human bloodstream, it sets up a linkage between vampire and victim and also starts healing the damage. This bite would've taken over a week to look like that. In order for the hybrid to do its job, it will attack anything that doesn't belong in its host, including its little cousins in the vampire's bloodstream. However, if the vampire takes enough to kill the victim, or brings him across, the hybridization never occurs, which means there's a lag-time before the two cells join. And, the hybrid seems to have a short lifespan, just long enough to strengthen the human so the vampire can feed again; otherwise, I'd have found more of the hybrids than I did. That's what I found in the scar tissue: dead hybrids

and white cells."

Sounds like an efficient system. Should I call them back, tell them what you found?" He made a move toward the nearest desk phone.

"Not yet. We've got to see if the first theory can be proven." She studied the activity on the slide, then backed off to give him a glimpse while she summarized into her minirecorder what she had told Mulder. "Okay, just to test the extent of the blood-bond, can you sense her now?"

He closed his eyes and summoned an image of his partner. After about ten seconds, he shook his head. "Nothing clear, and it may simply be wishful thinking at that. It's nowhere near as strong as it was before."

"Okay, that seems to follow the decrease in the hybrids, then." She added those findings to the tape, went through a set of slides until she found another odd cell, and introduced a drop of Nick's blood. Her "Hmm" this time was less enthusiastic.

"Not responding?"

"No. His cells aren't being recognized by yours as invaders, but his are also not attacking yours. Maybe it's the difference in Nick's and Dana's respective bugs. We'll have to try creating a hybrid from his proto-organisms."

Mulder collected his work-to-date on the Soares case and brought it to the lab to revise while Natalie conducted more tests, both making a substantial dent in the box of pastries in the meantime. Neither had taken much notice of the passage of time until the alarm beeped on her watch. "One hour to dawn warning," she explained. "I hope they're on their way back. She's not going to have a lot of lead time to get home."

As if in reply, Mulder's phone rang. "Three guesses...Mulder."

"Mulder, it's me. It took a while, but I think we got

our sample. The 'donor"s condition is still critical, but she's better than she was when we brought her in. Nick's bringing the package in alone, because I won't have time to stop by there and see the results before sunrise at home. Any news at your end?"

"I guess you could call it that. Hang on, I'll let Natalie fill you in." He handed the unit over.

"Dana? Have I got a 'Eureka' for you..." Lambert's recounting of her discovery was shorter and more technically oriented than her explanation to Mulder, as were her answers to Scully's inaudible questions. They talked a little longer, then she hung up and returned the phone, saying, "She's very pleased. Nick just left the hospital, so he should be here soon. Then we'll see if all this speculation is going to hold water."

When Nick arrived at last, Natalie's first impulse was to grab the bag out of his hands and dig for the syringe. Instead, she handed him a cotton swab and told him to "Stick this in your mouth." At his surprised expression, she added, "I need a saliva sample for what I'm going to do. Thank you." She calmly accepted the package and took it and the swab to her work site.

"So, what did you find?" Nick asked, his curiosity increasing.

"Well, to quote Howard Carter, 'wonderful things'." She started to rewind the tape, then changed her mind. "Mulder, why don't you tell him while I run this under the microscope?" While the lay version was rattled off in the background, she mixed the unknown donor's blood with Scully's on a slide and held her breath, drawing in more with a tiny gasp when she saw the immature organisms take on the appearance of the ones she had studied so often in samples of Nick's blood. "Oh, my God, we were right," she whispered.

Nick's hearing caught the words clearly, and he interrupted Mulder with an upraised hand. "You mean if she takes enough blood to kill..."

"The condition becomes permanent...at least that's what it looks like," she amended, more for his sake than any certainty of her own. "This inclusion of chemicals seems to give the mature cells their high resistance, if not invulnerability, to anything we've thrown at them. It's the keystone of what makes you immortal."

"But what would happen to Scully if her cells don't change?" Mulder's question had a trace of uneasiness in its monotonal phrasing.

"I can't say for certain. Nick, do you know any vampires who've never killed?"

"No," Nick replied. "Initiation, whether intentional or not, always occurred sooner or later. Usually sooner. She's complained that the hunger is erratic, as if her metabolism won't adhere to a normal pace, and she seems to respond better to human than cow blood."

"Well, that could be attributed to other factors, too. Besides, we may have a possible treatment, if not a cure, swimming in her partner's own veins."

Nick wanted to watch the next battery of tests, more so since it included the samples Natalie had drawn from him, but sunrise was less than half an hour away, and he had to get under cover before then. Mulder's offer to drive Natalie to the hotel when she was ready mollified Nick's uneasiness about leaving her to find her way in a strange city, so he left with minutes to spare.

"He always this protective?" Mulder observed once the detective had gone.

Natalie smiled at memories of other times. "Yes, well, you know about those knights in shining armor. For Nick, old habits die hard." She suggested that Mulder take a

short nap somewhere, remembering her own battles with her circadian clock and not wanting the agent to fall asleep at the wheel on the highway.

It took almost two hours to finish most of the tests, and the only reason she stopped was that the rest would take another four to eight to complete, and the day shift needed the work space. She cleaned up her area, collected her notes, and went to rouse Mulder, who was dozing in a highback office chair down the hall. She waited until they were out of the building before she gave him the results, wanting to be certain he was awake enough for the news to register. He seemed to be alert, but she made sure by buying him breakfast at the hotel restaurant when he refused to be talked into spending the day in an available room. A carefully-balanced meal and two cups of coffee later, she let him go at last.

The effects of digestion and caffeine kept him going until he was within a block of home, but he managed to get parked in front of the apartment complex without zoning out. Half of the neighbors's cars were gone by that time of the morning, so he found a spot near his entrance with no difficulty. He nodded a good morning at the tenants passing him on their way to work. Unlocking his door, he pondered whether this would become a regular activity.

Odd, he thought as he reached for the front hall light switch, I remember leaving the light on and the shade up in the living room...

A soft noise behind him caught his attention, and when he turned and saw red-gold eyes shining up at him under a mop of black hair, he thought, *Oh, hell...*

The darkness swallowed him whole.

Philadelphia—June 19; 12:20 A.M.

"Byron?"

Soares, intent on the paperwork on his desk, did not respond at once, and when he did look up, he let the mild irritation at being interrupted show in his expression. "Yes, Ann Marie?"

"Ahm, we were wondering if we were going out on a collection any time soon."

"As I told you and Mildred before, after Dana is properly initiated, we'll relocate and pick up where we left off. Sally made the necessary arrangements while we were out of town."

"Oh." Ann Marie fidgeted for a long moment before asking, "Are you sure she'll agree to stay with us? I mean, she's a Fed and all..."

"I think she'll agree quite readily, once I've explained things to her. Any mortal allegiances she had died when she came over. She belongs to us now, and if she has any objections to leaving her old life behind, well, I know I can motivate her to reconsider." A smile played across his face at the memory of the small redhead who had wandered into his house almost a week ago. His first instinct had been to feed on the intruder and leave her husk in the vacated building as an unanswered mystery, but when he saw the translucent cream complexion, the pale sapphire eyes, delicately-shaped mouth and fiery Titian hair, he had decided to complete his own collection with her. Mildred had been dark, athletic and sultry, while Ann Marie's angelic coloring and meeker nature suited his sense of symmetry. Sally was...Sally: practical, hardworking and unimaginative, the basic traits of her social class. *Clever enough to learn how to hide my investments, personal accounts and business dealings, but with no real initiative of her own.*

From his brief connection to Dana, however, he sensed a quick mind and a depth of passion he had not encountered since his younger days. With her knowledge of

criminal investigation harnessed for his use, they could elude the authorities for years. The real challenge, he thought, would be to correct the willful nature she had been allowed to retain from her childhood, and become all that a true woman was meant to be by nature's design: gentle, supportive of the man she was bound to and grateful for the protection and care he gave her.

Which is the way it should be. Women deluded into believing that they can make their own decisions without supervision pose a grave threat to the fabric of civilization. They lack sufficient intelligence and the moral character to make any serious contributions apart from the children they bear, but if allowed to run wild, they can distract men from our proper place in the grand design, bringing chaos to society. None of my women can produce a child because of their changed nature, so I must find other work for their hands and guidance for their minds and souls, lest they lead others to ruin.

"But what about her partner?"

The tone of her voice alerted him to the real reason behind the question. "Her partner is my concern, not yours. Neither you nor Mildred is to touch him in any way. Is that understood?"

"But why Mildred and me, and not Sally?"

"Sally does not need to be told. She can conduct herself appropriately. Now, go and tell Mildred what I said. Better yet, tell her I want to see her... now." He added one of his dangerous frowns, one that hinted at what would happen if his orders were not carried out.

The blonde scurried out the door, returning with her older sister sooner than he anticipated, which confirmed that Ann Marie's inquiries were in truth Mildred's, who had most likely been waiting in the next room. When the former singer turned to leave, he said, "No, you stay as well. I don't

want any misunderstandings later." Ann Marie nodded, but hovered near the door. Mildred was smart enough to stand and wait until she was addressed, but her body language, not to mention the mid-thigh sheath dress she wore, indicated that she had planned to be elsewhere and would be leaving the minute he finished his latest lecture.

"Mildred," he began calmly, rising from his chair and walking toward her, "I'm told there's some confusion with regards to my changes in the hierarchical structure of the business. Was there something I haven't made clear to you or Ann Marie in the past few days about Dana or how we were going to proceed with the acquisitions once we relocated? If there was, I'd like to hear it from you, not secondhand from your team partner."

"Well..." Mildred started to say, looking over her shoulder at Ann Marie.

Her gaze focused elsewhere, she did not see the backhanded blow until it snapped her head around. Spots had just formed in her vision when a fist driven into her stomach dropped her to the floor. She tried to curl up in self-defense, but he yanked her to her feet and slammed her against the highboy, tearing the wallpaper with the impact. His hand tightened on her throat and he forced her head against a drawer pull. "Understand this, you filthy circus tramp, that everything I tell you to do, you do. No 'variations', no 'poetic license', no 'last-minute changes', or all those other excuses you gave after your collection jobs. And do you know why?" Gasping sobs and whimpers, the latter from a wide-eyed Ann Marie, filled the silence. "And do you know why?"

Mildred tried to recall the correct answer from previous lectures, but the pain blanked her ability to summon it. "...Don't remember...Byron, please..."

"'Don't remember? Well, I'll have to refresh your memory." Another slap set her head ringing. "You do what

I tell you because everything you think you own is really mine. From the fine beds you sleep in, to the first-class trips you take around the world, to the allowance I give you so that you can buy these earrings"---he fingered one, then ripped it and its mate from her lobes---"this necklace"---it joined the posts on the carpet---"even this cheap dress." He clutched a handful of cloth at the shoulder and tore crosswise down the length of the outfit, his fingernails gouging her flesh along the way. "See? The material is so shoddy, the least tug will shred it. Just cheap material, like the whore who wears it. And, after all the education and special considerations I've given you, that's all you are, all you'll ever be." He rammed his knee into her stomach and, when she buckled, hurled her to the floor. He kicked her repeatedly, bellowing, "On your back, slut, where you belong!" She rolled out of his immediate reach, struggled to her feet and managed to stagger toward the door. "Don't let her get out, Ann Marie!"

Mildred's headlong flight was stopped by a shut door and a slight, shuddering figure. She tried to hold her dress closed, and implored in a broken whisper, "Please, Annie...you know---you know he'll kill me...please, let me go..."

Tears streamed down Ann Marie's face, terror and shame choking her reply. "I-I'm sorry, Millie...I'm sorry, I can't ...he'll kill me too if I do it...I'm sorry..." Her head drooped and eyes closed tightly, shutting out the battered and weeping image before her.

The reality of her partner's refusal had barely sunk in when Mildred felt iron fingers grab the back neckline of her dress and spin her across the room again. Centrifugal force dragged the cloth from her grasp and pulled her out of the garment completely, giving her no protection from the glass doors of the display cabinet that stopped her momentum. She howled as shards and slivers dug into her arms, face and

upper torso, and she cut herself further pushing free of the broken panes. The vampire in her had come roaring into life from the first kick, but she fought its instinct for self-defense and revenge, knowing her lesser strength and lack of fighting skill would not save her. Her sole chance of survival was to let him spend his anger on an unresisting target. Blood trickling into her eyes, she stumbled to the open floor and fell to her knees. Any words of apology, however, were cut off by his wrenching her upright by her hair and hauling her to the gas logs in the fireplace, which he turned on while he pushed her to the hearth.

"See this?" He held the ruined dress to her face. "Trash." He tossed it onto the fire. She felt his hand grab the gold silk panty and tear it from her hips, taking her last bit of outer dignity and feeding it to the flames. "Trash." His fingers tightened on her scalp---her lone warning of his next move---and, repeating the word a third time, shoved her head toward the inner hearth.

"Noooo!" she wailed, her scream echoed by a terrified Ann Marie. She threw both arms out to brace herself against the lintel and stop the forward motion. The blood from her wounds boiled and hissed, and she felt her lashes and brows crisp on her reddening face. She thought she heard someone crying and babbling for mercy with her voice, calling Soares "Master," but she didn't understand the rest of the words, much less what his answer was. All she knew was the sudden reversal of direction and a blissful coolness on her burned skin, then falling back onto the carpet and huddling in a tight ball, her moans now more of pain than fear.

"If I didn't need you to bring Dana in tomorrow night, I'd stake you outside and leave you for the dawn. But neither of the other two is strong enough to hold her if she resists, so you get another chance to live. Obey, and you can remain here. Fail, and I'll have your newest sister do the

deed herself." He spared a glance at the door, then turned and walked back to his desk, ordering, "Get this carny bitch out of my sight. She's not to leave the house until further notice."

Ann Marie hesitated, afraid to move lest he decide to strike out at her, then hurried to Mildred's side. She wept almost as loudly as the injured woman did, but she managed to get her partner off the floor and half-carried her out of the room.

Byron watched them go, then closed the door to mute the sounds. *Telling them to stop their noise will just make it louder. Women and children are alike in many ways.* He resumed his seat, but instead of continuing with the paperwork, he picked up the cell-phone lying on a stack of magazines and punched two keys.

A pair of rings, a click and *"Scully."*

"Is this Agent Dana Scully?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. My name is Byron Soares. I believe we met at my home last Wednesday afternoon. Do you remember me?"

Her "Yes." was chilly.

"Good. I'm sorry I wasn't able to finish our...interaction, but it was a limited encounter, given the time of day. I would like to take up where we left off, however. I know you must be very confused right now about what's happened, and the reality is somewhat different than what you've probably heard. You must have many questions, I'm sure, and the only person from whom you'll be able to get any useful answers is me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Soares, but other than arresting you on suspicion of aggravated murder, grand larceny, conspiracy to smuggle stolen property across state and international lines and assaulting a Federal officer, I don't think we have

anything important to discuss."

"Oh, I'm certain we do. I'd set up a meeting for tonight, but by the time I finished my other business, it would be too close to dawn, and that's one limitation we can't get around, which I'm sure you've discovered by now. We're not at the townhouse, so I'll have to send someone to meet you at an arranged site and guide you in, say, tomorrow night? How does four A.M. sound? Just you and me, my associates, your partner, all sitting down for an intimate little chat... alone."

"My partner?"

"Yes. It was very thoughtful of him, you know, to have your number programmed on his phone's speed-dial. He hasn't had much to say since yesterday morning. He's not available at the moment---" A spike of fear and pure rage, thinned but a little by distance, made him smile at the reaction he was able to elicit. "—But I know he'll agree with me that you need help to make full use of your new abilities and function within your restrictions."

"Where is he?"

"Somewhere safe. Still walking on the sunny side of the street, if that's what concerns you. It wouldn't be much of an incentive for you to come if anything...unfortunate...happened to him."

Another emotion-laden silence, then the surge dropped to almost nothing as she said, *"No, it wouldn't. Where's the site, and who am I looking for?"*

"I need to talk to my associates about that, so I'll let you know sometime tomorrow. Good night, my dear." He ended the call abruptly, not giving her superiors the chance to trace him, and set the phone down. *A charming voice, if a bit strident. Ah, well, I like a challenge.*

The attempt to retrieve Dana had been such a challenge. The exchange that brought her across and the leth-

argy of daytime had left him too weak to confront and defeat the human male following on her heels. Withdrawing to a hotel under assumed names, making departure plans and covering their trail took more time and energy, so he had to wait until Monday night to travel to Washington to claim her. She was not home, and his attempt to find her at the FBI was thwarted by the fact that the Forensics labs were not accessible from the main entrance. Byron wandered several floors before learning that he had misread the office directory. He touched her mind once to make certain of her presence there, feeling her chaotic emotions and memories before withdrawing contact. When he managed to compel another pair of guards at the correct entrance and reached the right floors, he could no longer sense her.

Frustrated, he had Mildred and Ann Marie leave their surveillance in Annapolis and join him at the partner's address, where they were more successful. They spent the day in his apartment, then flew his unconscious body to the townhouse and resumed residence there.

Soares came out of his recollections, aware of the damage in the room again, and felt his glow of accomplishment fade to mild irritation. *I didn't like doing that, but I've been too lax with that pair in recent years, and they were getting sloppy in their work.* The train of thought softened the annoyance, however, when he remembered that if the two women had not been sloppy, the authorities would not have suspected his involvement in the thefts and sent him his lovely new bride.

I'll give Mildred and Ann Marie a little time to consider the gravity of their sins before I decide to forgive them. It will make them work more carefully, and Dana can see how much easier her life will be under my tutelage. Right now, though... He punched the ALL-UNIT TRANSMIT button on his desk intercom and ordered, "Sally, meet me in

the parlor."

There was a pause, followed by "On my way from the kitchen, sir." A few minutes later, a light rap of knuckles at the door announced her arrival. "It's me, sir."

"Come in."

He watched for her reaction to the cabinet and smiled when she merely blinked and said, "I'll have that cleaned up at once, sir."

"Thank you." When she turned to leave, he asked, "The kitchen?" He was familiar with her schedule, knew that she never fed so late after rising, and wondered if she had caught the other two stealing from the bottles in the refrigerator.

"Yes. I was going to check on our 'guest', and in the event that he was awake, I thought I should have something prepared."

"Of course. We mustn't shirk hospitality, after all. Take care of that first; I need to be sure he's in good health for the initiation tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and, Sally?"

"Sir?"

"Close Mildred's account in the morning. I don't want her bolting before she's had a chance to think things over. Do the same to Ann Marie's, just to be certain. Tell them it's in preparation for our moving in a few days."

"Very good, sir." She gave him a bob of the head, which had long ago replaced the old-fashioned curtsey, and she closed the door behind her.

While Sally assembled a meal from the few provisions they kept for previous mortal "guests", Mildred sat on the edge of the upstairs bathtub, her arms holding the towel in front of her body. She tried not to shiver too much while Ann Marie plucked glass from the acrobat's flesh. She wasn't

cold---her nature made such extremes tolerable---but she was upset from the beating and humiliation and growing angrier by the moment.

"That filthy son of a bitch," she sniffled, wincing as an inch-long shard came out. "If I were a man, I'd've killed him with my bare hands."

"But you're not," Ann Marie pointed out, daubing at the blood trickling from the open wound until it stopped on its own. "And even if you were, he's an elder, our master. From what little we know of the rest of the community, that's one of the rules we know we can't break. You'd be an outcast, and it'd be open season on you for any vampire who found out."

"Really? And who'd tell them? Miss Suck-up Sally? You?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Yeah, right. My loyal friend, Ann Marie. My team partner. You were a lot of help back there. I'm surprised you didn't help him push me into the fire."

"I'd never do that. But you know what he'd've done if I'd let you get away. He'd've killed us both and found someone else to steal for him, like Sally said he did to those boys before us."

"So are you suggesting we continue to put up with this?" She tipped back the bottle Ann Marie had brought in with the gauze and tweezers and swallowed deeply. The euphoric rush from the blood, taken during their last burglary from a museum guard with a barber's razor and a funnel, soothed the pain in her body somewhat, but her hatred for Soares kicked up another notch. They were supposed to stay out of the "emergency" blood supply. She and Ann Marie knew, however, that he allowed Sally to dip into it on occasion on the pretext that the work she did gave her little time to hunt, and he had been seen helping himself without

offering a reason or an apology.

"No, but you should plan to escape when he least expects it. Save your money, open some accounts under different names. He's been doing it for centuries, so why shouldn't you? Pawn some of the stuff you don't use any more and deposit that money in the accounts. That way he won't notice the depletion in the one he knows about."

"And what if he tracks me down?"

"He can't if he doesn't know where to look. Buy clothes that you can keep out of sight until it's time. Dye your hair, get a wig, whatever. When you've got enough to survive on, you take on one of the new identities you've established and run. Just go out hunting one evening and don't come back. He won't be able to do anything until the next night."

"But he can sense where we are. Changing my appearance won't help."

"I don't think he's all that powerful." Mildred looked at her, astonished. "Has it occurred to you that if he wanted your absolute obedience a little while ago, he could've done so through other means?"

"Did it occur to you that he might have done it because he liked it?"

"I've met that type when I was working the clubs. If he enjoyed it so much, he'd've done worse than beat you. There's something else that makes me think he's not very good at this mental thing: how often have you gotten away with taking stuff not on the lists? He's only punished you when he's caught you, and I know you've swiped more than that. If he'd suspected anything, he'd've wormed it out of you long ago, right? Now, I think he can read us if we're close by, or if our emotions are strong, but beyond that..." She shrugged and returned to her work, adding only, "I've gotten everything on this side. Turn to the right a little."

"When did you figure this out?" Mildred's mind whirred with plans as she shifted.

"He tried to get the truth out of me once when you were out pawning your latest stash. I used to feel a twist in my head in the old days, and I knew he was pulling it from me then. I started to wonder when I didn't feel it that time. I told him some story and played dumb---you know he doesn't consider me very bright---and it seemed to satisfy him. He didn't corner you on it later, and that's when I began to pay attention."

"Do you think Sally knows?"

"If she does, she hasn't said." She gestured to the second bottle on the tray. "Did you want this, too, or should I put it back?"

"I think I'll be okay with this. Just hope he hasn't been counting lately."

"Oh, he won't notice right away. Sally filled two dummies and stashed them in the back."

"She did what?"

"Well, she found me in the bathroom getting the first aid stuff, and when I told her what happened, she took me to the kitchen and got these out of the icebox."

"So what did Her Highness have to say about this?" Mildred's lip curled at the imagined snide comments from the older woman.

"Not much. She looked at me funny, like she was trying to hold something in, and she said that no one deserved that kind of treatment."

The comment surprised the injured vampire. "She said that?"

"Uh-huh. She seemed...angry, I think. Then she went cold---like she does, y'know?---and that's when she gave me the bottles. I was leaving when he called her on the intercom."

"Huh. Well, at least she won't squeal on us...I hope. Better not say anything to her about me leaving, though. I know she won't shed any tears after I'm gone, but the fewer in on this, the better. Do you think he might close my account?"

Ann Marie flinched at the thought. "He might, just to make sure you don't have any money in case you do run. We have until tomorrow morning, and even if you can't go out tonight, I can."

They were plotting their next moves while Sally carried the tray of food to the basement. The room where the female government agent had encountered Soares was the same one they used to hold the long-term victims. The woman's partner was the current resident, and, from what she could infer from Soares' comments on the subject, Sally did not expect the man to live much longer, either as mortal or vampire. He would be hostage to the newcomer's good behavior until his usefulness waned past a certain point, then Soares would order one of them to destroy what was left or force the agent to do it himself. That way the latest "bride" could not focus her anger directly at Soares, making it easier for him to control her.

Sally learned long ago that fledglings, like mortals, were mentally vulnerable to coercion. Their emotions were bound up in an erratic relay of fear, shock and the Thirst. Over time, however, such an imbalance sorted itself out, and the master's influence would fade. She had heard from other vampires that, when the initiates had learned to harness their powers and desires, their masters often sent them on their way, relying on the blood-bond to communicate feelings and states of health.

Not Soares, however. The vampires he created did not so much leave his influence as escape it, in one form or another. She had heard of one who had managed to get

away; the rest either died by his hand or their own. Mildred walked a fatally sharp edge tonight, and Sally wondered if the younger woman would live out the week once the newest arrival was initiated.

She hesitated at the door of the holding room, the muffled sound of a rapid heartbeat and shallow breath warning her that their hostage was awake and standing just on the other side to ambush whoever came in. *Brave or naïvely desperate,* she thought, then knocked on the panel nearest the hinges, where she deduced he was waiting, and announced clearly, "Please step back from the door, Mr. Mulder. I've brought a tray, but I won't come in if you insist on being heroic, and we both know who would win out in the scuffle." There was no response at first, then she heard the scrape of shoes and patter and hiss of mortality grow fainter. When the footsteps halted, she unbolted the door and walked in, shutting it behind her. She noticed a few more dents in the room's second door, revealing that their captive had tried other means of escape when he had awakened to the new surroundings. *Not that it would have done you much good,* she thought, *unless you can climb straight up a sheet metal-lined flue.* The previous owner of the house had installed a sort of dumbwaiter leading from the coal storage bin to the master bedroom, sparing him or his servants the time, effort and mess of hauling buckets and dealing with the dust in the house. When the vampires moved in decades later, Soares had it widened to accommodate a human form and treated it like an elevator, visiting the monitor room or the latest "guest" when the whim or hunger struck him. On the day the agents came, he had gone down to the monitor room to let the woman in, hid in the cubicle and lured her into the holding cell, then retreated when he heard the man enter, locking and bolting the reinforced door behind him and flying back up to his room to sleep off the effects of the ex-

change.

As their newest inmate stood watching her, his demeanor reminded Sally of his four-footed namesake, down to the dark russet hair and light eyes that studied her and her every move. He seemed to stand on the balls of his feet, wary and alert for the slightest hint of inattention that would give him his chance to flee. She smiled, half from amusement at his intent and half in an attempt to put him at ease, and said, "I'm sorry they were less than gentle with you, but subtlety is not a strong attribute of theirs." She held up the tray for emphasis. "You've not eaten since last night, I'll warrant, so I thought I'd bring you something."

His gaze shifted to the covered rectangle in her hands, blinked, and asked in a deadpan tenor, "Any gingerbread?"

"I beg your pardon?" The question threw her completely.

"Well, I presume that, since I'm to be the main course later on, your job is to fatten me up?" He followed her to the cot standing along one wall, but kept his distance while she set the tray down.

"Ah, yes, 'gingerbread'." Her mouth twitched in honest humor at the fairy-tale reference, noting also his elevated heartrate and the sharp scent of fear. *He knows his life is measured in hours now, and he makes jokes to keep his mind clear.* "Sorry, we're all out, and I doubt a chicken bone would be much help to you, either." He shrugged. She headed to a near corner and picked up the chamberpot, replacing it with a clean one from just outside the room. "If there's anything else you need, I can try to get it."

Mulder did not move from his spot until she paused in the door, waiting for his reply. Instead of answering, however, he sat down on the small bed and spared a look under the towel before speaking. "So, are you one of the brides of

Dracula?"

Sally winced at the old comparison, saying only, "Mr. Soares is our employer." Deciding to put in a dig of her own, she added, "What he intends for your partner, on the other hand, may be something different." She detected a minor trace of anger in the air, but he did not react outwardly. "She should be here sometime tomorrow morning."

"What makes you think she'd come?"

"Mr. Soares has...certain incentives planned." She had not been told what they were, but she suspected a phone call or two and pain for the abducted agent.

Mulder's imagination displayed a few unpleasant scenarios, and he ventured one to test the waters that he knew he was about to be thrown into without paddle or canoe. "Like using the blood-bond between us to force her here?"

"What do you know about that?" she asked, suspicious. Soares had mentioned such connections in passing, but they had rarely kept a mortal alive long enough to explore anything more than the ability to summon and control. The idea that the bond could also affect the vampire unnerved and intrigued her. She approached the cot, forgetting to shut the door in her agitation, and searched his throat for the usual marks. "Where did she take from you? When?"

"She didn't take," he explained as he rolled up the wrinkled shirt sleeve to show the now- unbandaged marks, "I gave." He kept his expression neutral, hoping she could not detect the lie by other means.

Sally stared at the almost-invisible punctures on the man's forearm, her mind reeling. She had never heard of a mortal submitting freely to a vampire's need except in the romance of fiction, but she knew the rule about marked humans from the few elders she had encountered. Only a rogue

would risk exile by stealing another vampire's food, they had said. Soares would have to be told at once that this human was off-limits until Dana gave them permission.

Mulder watched the dark blonde woman hurry out of his cell and lock him in again. He had not been certain of her reaction when he mentioned the bond, but he hoped the false confession might buy him some time. Checking the contents of the tray once more, he turned his gaze upward and murmured, "Where are you, Gretel? Hansel's about to get munched."

June 20; 12:45 A.M.

"Well, I think that's everything," Mildred announced, eyeing the pair of suitcases and overnight bag at her feet. She walked over to the nightstand and picked up the pair of bank and plain white envelopes stuffed with bills in various denominations and an airline ticket to Boston and slipped both into her purse. Ann Marie had bought the ticket and withdrawn half of her savings yesterday morning to give to Mildred, but both were surprised by a visit later in the evening from Sally, who had handed the tall brunette the white envelope. She explained that Soares had ordered Ann Marie's and Mildred's accounts closed, that the money was from Mildred's, and that she should disappear at once. Sally had not given the astonished Mildred the chance to thank her, but turned from the door and disappeared into her own room.

"Why don't you just take off now?" Ann Marie suggested. "I'll say you were in here all evening. You shouldn't waste time on a futile gesture that'll get us in trouble after you've gone."

"Oh, but it's not futile, Annie," Mildred replied with a venomous smile as she tugged a pillowcase from her bed.

"And besides, you didn't know I was going to do this, because I was in here the whole evening. You said so."

"But you know the rules..."

"Ffeh! Rules are made by people who want to keep others from doing what they want to do. Byron's had me under his thumb since 1912, and I'm tired of playing his little games to get what I deserve, and then get slapped down for showing initiative. I thought becoming a vampire would free me from that sort of treatment, but he's no better than the mortal men."

And it took you this long to realize that? Ann Marie countered in her mind, reluctant to antagonize Mildred in the middle of trying to dissuade her from committing a dangerous error. Instead, she redirected the focus of the error's consequences: "You may be out of his reach after tonight, but what about the rest of us? He'll know you got money from somewhere, and even if he doesn't force the truth from me one way or another, it's going to be hell on earth once he's figured out you're not coming back."

"If he comes down on anyone, it'll probably be Sally. She's going to have to explain where the money from my account went after she closed it. You can tell him I must have stolen your ATM card yesterday and sneaked out to get money before he called us into the parlor. He doesn't look at the bank statements that closely; that's Sally's job." Ann Marie's expression was still doubtful and apprehensive, so Mildred pushed home another point to convince her. "Besides, he can't afford to lose either you or Sally right now. Back when he was using those kids, he did most of the planning and directed the acquisitions while she did the books. Now all he does anymore is schmooze with the clients, research the target's security system, deliver the goods and spend his share of the money. The three of us do the <u>real</u> work, and he doesn't have the time to get back into it before

some of those deliveries come due. All you gotta do is play dumb---and like you said, he expects that from you---and he'll leave you alone."

She caught a glimpse of the nightstand clock, let out a small gasp and headed for the door. "Yikes, I better be going now if I'm gonna jimmy the monitors and leave my little 'message'. I'll be back to get the luggage before he 'reminds' me to leave for the rendezvous point. With any luck, he'll be too busy trying to collect his newest victim himself to notice I've---shall we say---gotten my 'fox' a little earlier than we'd planned?" Her grin at the pun was unpleasantly feral. "Take care of yourself, kid. Better hoof it back to your room so your story'll hold. If you're lucky, maybe you'll get a chance to cut loose, too, and we'll catch up to each other on the road someday." She winked and slipped out into the hall.

Ann Marie waited until she heard Mildred's footsteps fade downstairs before launching herself from the bed and heading for the door. She hesitated, her hand on the knob as second thoughts arrested her flight to stop the other vampire from going down to the basement. *Maybe I should let her have the mortal, and then that Fed woman won't have any reason to come here, much less stay. Maybe Byron won't punish us too much if the man dies, but he's been so set on having the Fed join us that, once he's done with us, he'll hunt Millie down and kill her out of revenge. But she won't listen to me, and if I chase after her and make a scene, it might attract his attention and get us both in worse trouble than she was before.*

She agonized over her next move for several seconds more, then left the room and made for Sally's door. There was no answer to her knock, elevating her sense of panic until she remembered that the elder was often on-line at this time of the morning with Far East business concerns or

vampires on the West Coast and in Western Europe, which meant she was in the parlor.

Sally was in the middle of a real-estate search when a frantic Ann Marie burst into the room. The younger woman stood, mouth working in an attempt to find the right words to convey the gravity of the situation, then she gave up and blurted out, "We're in trouble, and I need you to stop her before she does something stupid. I told her it was a bad idea, but she won't listen to me, and if he finds out..."

"Ann...Ann, what is she going to do?" Sally knew Ann Marie did not get this flustered without good reason, and the blonde's distress set off her own internal alarms. Ann Marie's gaze flickered down to the floor, indicating the basement below, and the helpless look and fearful gasp that followed was the answer Sally needed. "Dear God..." she breathed, rising and striding to the door with Ann Marie at her heels.

"You're not going to tell him, are you? He's still angry from..." Ann Marie began as they hurried to the stairs off the kitchen.

"Let me handle it, Ann. You go up to her room and hide any evidence that she was about to leave. He mustn't know what she's been planning, because he'll suspect you were in on it, and he'll come after you next." The other vampire hesitated, but Sally shooed her toward the staircase leading up from the foyer. "Go, before he hears us." Ann Marie paused a moment longer, then dashed down the hall.

The first rattle of the doorknob woke Mulder, and the loud clunk of the bolt being thrown back told him something was very wrong. He sat up and slid his legs off the cot, hastily rubbing his eyes clear of sleep and tensing his body for fight, flight or negotiation. When the door opened, however, and he saw the expression on the tall, dark-haired vampire who had knocked him out, he knew she was not going to

give him the chance for any of those actions. He had seen the same look on Scully's face when the vampire had taken control, and the memory spurred him into closing his eyes and curling up into a tight ball, his hands clasped behind his head to protect his throat.

"Oh, now, Foxie, don't be that way," she purred, locking the door. Her hips swayed as she came closer to her prey. "I just want to talk to you for a little while. C'mon, sit up like a normal person and we'll talk, okay?"

"No," a muffled voice came from the huddled figure.

"I don't have time for this, Fox, so be a good boy and look at me." She frowned at the headshake he gave in reply, then listened for his heartbeat and altered her voice to the command pitch. "Look at me, Fox."

He felt the words reverberate in his mind, but he shut her out by reciting off-color limericks he had read in some of his magazines. He was just beginning the fourth poem when hands grabbed the back of his collar and waistband, and he found himself flying into the far wall. The impact broke his defensive posture and concentration, but he closed his eyes again once he landed. He scooted backward until he hit concrete and resumed his hedgehog pose, less concerned with dignity at the moment than survival. Fingers like steel hooks grabbed his wrists and tried to pull them off his shoulders, but his elbows were locked. The hooks tightened, preparing to crush bone, so he bunched his forearm muscles, abandoned passive resistance and risked angering her further by kicking out where he guessed her to be. He connected once; the snarling became a cougar-like roar, and he was dragged by the collar and slammed against the wall he had used to protect his back. He held on through two collisions, but the third knocked the breath out of him, and he crumpled to the floor. He was hauled to his feet, his feeble blows batted away and his shirt forced open to bare his

neck. "Now, little man," she hissed triumphantly, taking hold of his jaw and shoving it to one side, "let's see how much you'll be worth to him after this."

In his last attempt to struggle free, Mulder almost missed the sound of a clattering door and footsteps behind his attacker. She also seemed to hear it, because he felt her descent to his throat falter, but she did not turn in time to face the intrusion before she was yanked away, letting him collapse once more. A second later, a wet crunching sound and her shrieks compelled him to risk opening his eyes just enough to witness Soares standing over her spear-impaled body and lifting a wide-bladed sword high. Mulder's eyes shut before the weapon came down, not needing to see the decapitation to know what came next.

Soares looked down at the twitching corpse at his feet, spared a cursory glance at Mildred's erstwhile victim, then turned to the woman waiting at the coal storage door. "Clean this mess up. Get the other one to help you; she also has a lesson to learn tonight." He pushed past her and flew up the widened chute to the second floor.

Sally did not bother to watch her employer's departure, but sighed with regret over the body and stepped around it to reach the still-living captive. She laid a hand on his shoulder, and was not surprised when he gasped and flinched back from her touch. "It's all right, Mr. Mulder. It's me, Sally. He's gone now. You can open your eyes."

He looked up at the sound of her voice look up, knowing instinctively that she had no designs on his blood at the moment, and that he was safe as he ever would be in this cell. He pushed up to a sitting position, rested an elbow on one drawn-up knee and let his head sink to his chest while he took mental stock of the bruises and other shocks to his system in the past two minutes. At last, he met her gaze again, shifted his own to Mildred and asked, "Why?"

Sally did not bother to follow where the agent was looking; she would see the body when they disposed of it, and in her memory for years afterward. "She knew you were not to be touched, but she and Mr. Soares had a...a falling-out, and I believe she intended to make some sort of statement before she ran away. Fortunately for you, we got here in time."

"Yeah, well, I don't think he's too worried about that. He just wants to keep me alive until my partner gets here, right? Then what, he uses me for a hostage to get her to come with him, or does he make her watch while he and you two drain me like a keg at a frat party?" The challenging sarcasm faded from his expression, replaced by a dawning horror. "He's going to feed me to Scully, isn't he?"

She broke eye contact at that question, unwilling to confess that the thought had occurred to her more than once, although she was certain that Soares would do what would net him the most profit with the least effort on his part. Forcing Dana into something that Sally knew would be abhorrent to the woman agent would take more control than Soares had ever expended on one of his fledglings. Her employer had a harsh streak, but she had never seen out-and-out sadism in the man. *Last night, however, was more excessive than usual...* She turned brown eyes on the mortal again and replied wearily, "Would he? In all honesty, Mr. Mulder, I don't know."

Downtown Philadelphia--3:10 A.M.

Ann Marie checked her watch and scanned the night sky for the tenth time in an hour, growing more furious with Byron Soares and Dana Scully as the minutes passed. He had sent her in Mildred's stead to the meeting place---the rooftop of the Gallery Mall---and she knew better than to

refuse the task, but she had made her resentment known by confronting Sally over telling Soares about Mildred's plan to kill the human. The older woman's response had been terse and brutally frank, reminding Ann Marie of what Soares had done to her for the minor sin of theft, and that being accomplices to Mildred's open disobedience could have proved fatal to them both.

It's all her fault, Ann Marie grumbled to herself, pacing along the Market Street side of the building. If he hadn't wanted that Fed so badly, Millie would still be alive, and everything would be the same as always. Now I have to sit here and wait for her to show up so I can lead her to the house. Well, she won't enjoy that most-favored status for long... Her sullen musings were interrupted by a movement above the city lights and the growing sense of a vampire's presence. She sharpened her night vision and leaped skyward to meet the newcomer, who paused long enough to acknowledge seeing her before swerving away and out of the downtown area. Confused and angry, Ann Marie turned to pursue.

Scully glanced over her shoulder once to see if the blonde woman was following, then shifted upward to a faster-moving current. It had seemed to please Soares when she told him that she had figured out the basics of flight on her own, which was what she and Nick had planned. They decided to keep her exposure to another vampire a secret, deluding their target into thinking that his newest creation was still fairly ignorant of her abilities. She did not want to reveal too much just yet, but she had to maintain distance from her supposed escort until she reached the center of the city. Since she knew she might need the skill to track him and mortal suspects in the future, she had learned to negotiate the erratic winds between the taller buildings in Washington's and Annapolis' business districts during last night's

and this evening's flying practice. *I just hope she hasn't learned the same maneuvers, or this could take longer.*

When she got to the first block, she dropped to a few floors above the streetlights and leveled out. Looking behind to make certain that the other woman was still following, Scully crossed three more streets, snapped a sharp right, then wrenched upward in a power ascent, slowing and looping back when she saw Ann Marie pass below. She watched the blonde reduce speed, peering left, right, and up, then stop completely. Scully knew she had seconds to act before her quarry would think to look above and behind her, so she gauged the angle of attack quickly, clasped her hands before her in a stiff-armed strike and stooped like a falcon on a sparrow. She caught the woman between the shoulder blades and slammed her to the asphalt.

Ann Marie had sensed Scully nearby, but did not pinpoint the location before she was cannonballed into the middle of the street. She had no chance to recover from the impact, but was hauled to her feet, dragged over to the sidewalk and shoved face-first against a building. Years of living up to mortal gender roles and working for Soares had conditioned her not to fight anyone bigger than she was, so she did not resist initially. When Scully turned her around, however, and Ann Marie saw that they were about the same size, she let her anger override her reflexes and struck out at the agent. Her hand grasped for and missed a handful of red hair, but caught on a gold chain. She pulled it toward her in an attempt to bring Scully closer to claw her face.

The cross touched her hand.

Scully had just begun to react to Ann Marie's sudden lashing-out when the older vampire's growl changed to a screech of pain and she huddled at Scully's feet, clutching a burned hand and wailing "Keep it away from me!"

So, it <u>does</u> work. She had been willing to take Nick's

word concerning vampiric aversion to religious objects---herself being the exception to the rule---but seeing actual proof confirmed it for her. *And if it affects one of Soares' minions, it stands to reason that it would burn him, too, since he'll have impressed her with his own beliefs.* "All right, I'm putting it away," she said, tucking the necklace back under her blouse, "but it's coming back out if you don't answer some questions."

The warning, a variant on the standard used by the "bad cop" in a difficult interrogation, was misunderstood to be a threat. *And she acts just like Byron, too.* Glowering up at her captor, Ann Marie countered, "But I'm supposed to take you to the house."

"The townhouse?" Ann Marie nodded. "But he said he wasn't staying..." *And remember the last time you believed what he said?* "More lies, of course...is my partner there?"

Another nod, followed by a sneer. "And Byron made sure none of us touched him until you got there." *And Millie's blood is on your hands, too...*

"Who else?" She stepped back to allow Ann Marie room to get to her feet.

"Sally, his...secretary." The ache in her hand was fading, but she continued to hold it and stared at the spot on Scully's blouse where the offending object was hidden. *How can she stand to touch it, much less wear it around her neck?* The blatant deviation from what she had been taught about her kind made her hate the fledgling even more.

"Is she a vampire, too?" A curt head-bob this time, and Scully sensed betrayal under the wave of rage flowing from the hostile young woman. Under calmer circumstances, Scully would have tried to lead her subject into conversation in hopes of more detailed information. *But I don't have time to get into dysfunctional family dynamics, and this*

is more Mulder's field than mine. "All right, Ann Marie, we'll go to the house. If you're involved in any of Mr. Soares' illegal acts, we'll have to take you in for questioning." *Right now, I'm more concerned with getting Mulder out in one piece. Arresting vampires is more problematic, but not impossible.*

Ann Marie could not hear Scully's thoughts, but her sarcastic snort answered them, anyway. "You expect us to just go quietly off to a mortal's jail? Boy, are you stupid! Guess that explains why you can wear that...thing."

Scully had heard worse insults from suspects, so it didn't bother her, but she decided to address the woman's observation, if merely to plant a seed of doubt about Soares' credibility and gain Ann Marie's cooperation. "I can wear a cross because I'm not afraid of it."

"But we're supposed to be."

"Why?"

"Byron said so...all the stories said so. Monsters can't touch holy things."

Scully almost smiled at the unintended echo of an earlier conversation. "If I thought I was a monster, Ann Marie, I might believe that. But not all vampires are monsters." *I can't say the same for your boss, however...*

Ann Marie made a rude noise. "Right. Less than a week since you came across, and you're such an expert. Bet you've read all the modern fiction: 'heroic vampires'...what a crock!"

Her proximity to so much anger and scorn was beginning to wear on Scully's nerves, and she felt her canines extend with the urge to slap the blonde into the next county. She swallowed the temptation and said simply, "Let's go."

"Sure. Let's get this over with." She stormed past the agent and took off, pointedly not caring whether any mortals noticed nor looking to see if Scully followed.

Classic battered-wife syndrome, Scully thought as she leaped after Ann Marie from a more discreet location. I can tell she has no love for Soares---it's evident in her voice, even if I couldn't sense her emotions---but she does his bidding, parrots his teachings without question. She puts up with it because she feels she has nowhere else to go. I must seem like his latest mistress to her, which explains the hostility. Wonder if she'd prevent us from taking him in...?

The townhouse was some distance from the mall, and Scully was certain that Soares had planned it so that by the time she confronted him and managed to free Mulder, the dawn would trap them inside. There was no guarantee that her partner would be in any condition to procure safe transportation away from the house. *At least he's still alive...*

From her rolling chair in the monitor room, Sally joy-sticked the front door security camera to track the approach of the two women, tuning the focus on Ann Marie, then switching to Scully. *He always did have a weakness for redheads,* she recalled, thinking back on the few he had taken the leisure to court before he drained them. When they entered the house, she accessed control of the hall camera, noting that the agent's eyes targeted it while Sally made adjustments. *And I see you've learned to make use of that sharper hearing. You'll need it, along with everything else, to survive the next hour.* Ann Marie started toward the library---the assigned meeting place--- but Scully hesitated near the door for a second before heading after her. *Unlocking the door, are we? To let someone in? No, no one outside. Perhaps to speed your escape? Yes, that's it.* She flipped a toggle on a panel, and the bolts slid back into place. Scully froze at the sound, turned to see her effort thwarted, glanced up at the camera's eye once more, then continued to follow her escort.

The opening of the library door alerted the motion

detector, which in turn activated the upper and lower level monitors. Sally had considered finding a house with a spacious library to be a major achievement, having wanted a place to properly store her growing collection for decades. Soares had no real interest in literature, but he did appreciate the value of the many first editions and signed copies she had accumulated, and so allowed her this indulgence. Yet another of the previous owner's improvements to the house, he had torn out most of the second story, leaving the windows and enough floor for shelves and a bannistered gallery with a wrought iron spiral staircase. In a concession to Soares, Sally left space on the walls for his own collection of antique weapons, displayed and well-sharpened. He had used part of his armory to execute Mildred, as he had done to his earlier trio of hired thieves.

"We're supposed to wait here for the others," she heard Ann Marie tell Scully, the former turning on the floor lamps from a wall switch. The newcomer's head swiveled to take in the dozens of shelves, and Sally detected a faint smile of awed pleasure before it was buried under a businesslike mask. *Someone else with a respect for books? Do I dare hope for a kindred spirit?* An odd movement from the room's other occupant seized her attention, and she saw Ann Marie draw a short spear from under the sofa and step up behind Scully.

Whether the agent heard or sensed her assailant, Sally did not know, but Scully pivoted on one heel and knocked the weapon away from her, striking a blow of her own with a fist to Ann Marie's solar plexus. The latter fell back, coughing, but hung on to the spear and tried to wrest it free of her intended victim's grasp. Scully forced it up, back and to one side, twisting it out of Ann Marie's hands and throwing it on the maple bergére to her right, then stepped between it and the blonde. Ann Marie leaped upon her and

drove her backward over the chair to the floor, screaming blame at Scully for all that had gone wrong in the past few days, while the perplexed fledgling tried to reason with her attacker and keep the spear out of reach. They rolled back and forth on the carpet for several seconds, then Scully managed to wedge a knee between them and leg-throw Ann Marie off her.

The ex-band singer landed on a small end table, which collapsed under her. She rolled away from the splintered wood, snatched up one of the legs, and shot upward, dodging Scully's lunge to take it away. To avoid becoming a stationary target, the agent followed, grabbing the woman's wrists and pinning her against a bookcase. Sally thought she could see the feral glow in Scully's eyes as she slammed Ann Marie's weaponed hand on a shelf edge, but they were too far from the camera for her to be certain.

A growing sensation of a presence interrupted Sally's concentration on the monitor screen, and she made a few adjustments on the control panel in response before refocusing on the fight. The women's struggle had sent both of them over the railing to a hard landing on the floor, but neither let go of the other. *At least they didn't break more furniture.* She heard the doorknob turn, then Soares' voice seconds later. He approached and stood at her left shoulder.

"My, my. Sibling rivalry already," he commented drily after a few seconds of watching the combatants. He winced when Scully was hurled through one of the upper-level windows, but smiled when she returned, snarling, to plow into her opponent. They rolled end-over-end, the momentum carrying them into a set of chairs, and Ann Marie grabbed one and slammed it against Scully. The agent fell away from the blow, then snatched up another chair and swung it at the blonde head. Ann Marie ducked, the back of the impromptu weapon missing her by an inch, and she

aimed a fist at Scully's face, who managed to avoid the worst of the punch by a sudden instinctive pull-back. "It's a shame we're not taping this," he added, sparing a brief glance at the recorders linked only to the external cameras. "Could make for amusing entertainment in the future." When there was no reaction from the other watcher, he said, "You don't approve, I take it."

"It's not my place to approve or disapprove, sir," Sally answered in a neutral tone.

"Good. It's heartening to see that someone else around here remembers that." He scanned the rest of the monitor array and noticed that a few were dark. "What happened to Cameras One, Two, Six and Eight?"

"Mildred."

"Ah. Well, I'd best go fetch the fifth member of our little party and put a stop to this foolishness, diverting as it is. Join us once I calm things down."

Sally murmured an automatic "Yes, sir," at his retreating back, then turned her attention to the library screens. Both women were airborne now, growling and hissing. Each ricocheted off a wall, bookcase, or the ceiling in her struggle to subdue---or, in Ann Marie's case, kill---the other. The battle came to an abrupt end when Scully braced herself against the railing, pulled her knees up to her chest, and drove both feet into Ann Marie's ribcage as the older vampire hurtled toward her goal, fingers crooked into talons. The force of the kick sent Ann Marie across the room, where her lower legs snagged on the opposite bannister, flipped her body 90 degrees, and rammed her, shoulders first, into a bookcase, where her head whiplashed against a shelf. Sally's jaw tightened when she thought she heard neck vertebrae snap on impact, and she drew in a hissing gasp as Ann Marie crumpled to the walkway and lay like a dropped ragdoll. She

stared at the limp form for a moment before shifting her gaze to the survivor, who climbed over the railing and ran to the far side of the library. Scully knelt beside her vanquished opponent and reached down to check for a pulse, although Sally knew that the agent would not find one whether Ann Marie was alive or not.

Scully looked up---at what, Sally could not see---but the abrupt opening of the library door and the entrance of Soares with his hostage explained the government woman's strange action. *She felt them approach; one or the other, I can't say. Now we'll see how well he can control a modern woman, fledgling or not. If not, it's death for her and her partner...*

"Good morning, Dana," Soares began, a heavy trace of smugness in his cheerful greeting. When he located his newest acquisition, he paused at the scene above, and anything else he had planned to say was discarded as quickly as his human-sized burden, who was dumped onto the sofa.

When Mulder did not sit up, Sally guessed that Soares had either taken the mortal by surprise, or had managed to get past his barriers. *It's best that you're not awake for this,* she thought. *You won't have to see her face when he makes her take you...*

The expression on Scully's face was unreadable on the screen, but the disgust in her voice was evident even to a stranger. "She's dead, Soares. Was that on your orders?"

"Of course not, my dear. If I'd wanted you destroyed, I'd never have brought you across in the first place. No, it was her own stupid jealousy---and your Bureau's exceptional self-defense courses---which did her in. A damned shame, but I suppose it couldn't be helped, could it?"

Even over the open intercom, Sally could hear the first vibrations of his attempt to manipulate the red-haired woman's thoughts. It had long ago ceased to have any effect

on her, but she remembered her first year under his control, and how long it had taken before she noticed her own sense of autonomy growing. *All he needs is to have you in his thrall long enough to kill, and then there is no going back.*

"No, it couldn't be helped. But it was not my intent to kill her." Scully rose and took a step toward the staircase, hesitated and looked at the railing as if considering a jump down, then continued on her way to the metal spiral.

Soares watched her descent, saying nothing until she reached the bottom. "Why walk, my child, when you can fly?" he admonished her, half-teasing.

"Because I choose to," Scully replied, edging toward the sofa.

"How quaint, clinging to human habits still. It's been so long since I was changed, that I'd forgotten how strong the need is to deny one's new existence, to fall back on the old ways..."

"I'm not denying what I am, what you made me. But I choose when and where I use my abilities, and not act on a whim."

"An excellent point. You show much more restraint than your late sisters ever did." He paused a beat, possibly to gauge her reaction, before going on. "Well, at least they won't be here to teach you any bad habits."

"Your 'associate', Ann Marie, blamed me for the death of someone named Mildred, but she never explained why."

He shrugged. "Who knows why some women do certain things?"

Sally noticed, if Soares did not, that the newcomer's back stiffened at his rhetorical question. Careful, young one. He will tolerate dissent up to a point, and if you want to see sunset later today, you had best choose your words prudently. To her relief, Scully's response was a non-committal

sound in the throat.

Soares seemed to take the vague noise for agreement, because he changed subjects without a segué, advancing on Scully with a confident swagger in his step. "So, now you are here. You'll find living and working with us much more of a challenge than the drudgery of your mortal life, once you've been schooled in the finer points of what it means to be a vampire. Such wonders I can show you, dear Dana: the pure joy of riding the night winds, not merely as a form of travel, but as a hunter, like the owl and the nighthawk; the sense of power over those lesser men who would deny you the respect you deserve because of your height or your sex."

Sally caught the uptilt of Scully's head at that, a sign that she was listening now.

"Yes, how many times have you wanted to avenge the wrongs done you and other women by fools like them? Well, now you have that power, and you can wield it with impunity, because to be a vampire means to live outside the feeble restrictions of mortal walls. We are the shadows they fear---" he followed her slow retreat to the front of the sofa, stopping at last with Mulder's still-unmoving form at her right--- "their superior in all things that truly matter, possessing the things that they crave but do not have the courage to take for themselves. But I have offered these things to you, my beautiful Dana, and you were strong enough to take them into you and rise from the all-engulfing pit these pathetic mortals call death. Strength beyond human endurance, immortality... not just immortality, but also eternal youth and beauty. You can never sicken and die, and all but mortal wounds are an annoying but brief nuisance to our kind..."

That's how he trapped the others: spoke pretty words to feed their vanity, their desire to hurt those who ill-used them. They never thought to ask the price of such an offer until the bill came due, and they continued to pay until

death freed them from his service... Sally observed Scully's body language and, from what she could discern of the woman's facial expressions in her profile, saw the stiff resistance fading and recognized the somnambulant posture of the mesmerized fledgling. Sally's shoulders bowed with a disappointed sigh. This is how it always begins...

Soares wound up his egregiously floral speech with a pitch to Scully to bring her partner across, proposing that the changes in her new life would not seem so abrupt if she had someone to share it with. As if to test the strength of his hold on her, he pointed out that it was easier to cover their trail if the other agent was not left behind to track them down. Scully's flat-voiced "Yes" was enough to convince Sally that the young vampire was under their maker's spell, and she began to reorganize the household and travel schedules in her mind. She watched Scully sit on the edge of the sofa, lean over Mulder's upper torso, and lay a hand along one side of his neck.

"Fox, do you hear me?" Scully asked, her voice pitched to command mode.

Since Scully's position blocked her view of Mulder's face, Sally could not discern whether the summons had opened his eyes or not, but the dull tone in his "Yes" meant the fledgling had learned to control her marked mortal, whether his claim of volunteering his blood was true or not. Scully's next words were spoken too quietly for even Sally's sharp ears, but she guessed the gist of it: Mulder was being reassured that he would feel no pain, and that he would enjoy his new life when he awakened next. Scully leaned forward, shifted him a little to gain clear access to the right artery, bent her head over his neck, and struck.

Mulder's visible hand jerked up, clutched air, then wilted and fell as Scully lingered at his throat. Motion on the upper floor drew Sally's gaze from the scene, and, assuming

that Ann Marie was still alive, tightened the camera's focus for a closer look. Her eyes widened, and she reached for the intercom button to tell Soares, but a second's reconsideration pulled her hand back, and she switched attention between the two monitors. *Why the delay...?*

Soares watched the feeding a moment longer, then laid a hand on Scully's shoulder, saying, "That's enough, Dana. I'll finish it." When she did not pull back at once, his manner became more stern. "You don't have the experience to bring another across, my girl. Do you want to kill him?"

Two mortal breath's hesitation, then she withdrew slowly, her breathing loud and hoarse over the speakers. Sally spotted a dark smear on Scully's lips as she looked up to hiss at her creator. Soares bared his own fangs, and the woman stood and stepped away to give him room. Bending to drink, he started, stared at the unmoving figure under him, then turned an astonished expression on Scully. "But, where did you...?"

"Hey," a dry voice interrupted from the sofa. When Soares glanced down, Mulder lifted what appeared to be a small plant mister, announced, "Suck this, Lugosi." and pumped three sprays of its contents in the vampire's face.

The instant Soares staggered back, clutching his face and screaming, the female agent grabbed her partner beneath the arms and dragged him out of camera range. Sally barely had a chance to twitch the controls to follow them when Scully yelled, "Now, Nick!"

With that signal, the fair-haired man Sally had spotted crouching on the walkway rose to his knees, aimed a crossbow over the railing and fired. A thin blade of excruciating heat burned into Sally's ribcage and scraped at her spine as she watched the bolt pierce Byron Soares just to the right of his heart. The joystick clattered to the floor, jarring the camera out of alignment. The vampire within her

shrieked that they had to save their master, their blood-kin, but she defied the impulse and, teeth gritted against pain and instinct, reached down and snatched up the instrument. She managed to refocus just in time to see a half-reclining Soares tug the arrow partially free, grunting in agony from the effort. *No, not when they're so close...*

Suddenly, another image entered the frame. Scully, armed with Ann Marie's spear, knelt between him and the camera, gripped his shoulder to hold him still, and, with a guttural hiss, drove the point into his heart. Sally nearly howled from the effects of the blood-link, squeezing a fist over the corresponding spot and praying for an end to the torment. Visions and almost-words flooded her mind, and she wasn't sure if the exchange she heard was over the speakers or in her head:

"Treacherous wench...would've given you the world...you're mine..."

"No...no one owns me..."

Sally felt the connection surge toward her, trying to draw her close one last time, when it dropped away like dark water pulled down a drain. Where the fierce ache and the bond to her maker had been, there was now a hole, as if an abscessed tooth in her awareness had finally been yanked out and washed clean. The relief brought tears to Sally's eyes, and she fell back in her chair, whispering, "Free, free..."

A strange male voice from the intercom broke into her joyous mantra a scant moment later, asking, "Is everyone all right?"

Does deliriously happy count? was her silent answer, not hearing the others' replies. Her thoughts flickered back to the day she and Soares met, the night he had made her a vampire, and the moment she decided to best him at his own game. It had taken a year to learn all of his secrets, both vampiric and mundane, and another four before she gained

access to his holdings. By the end of the second decade, he had made her his main beneficiary and executrix---his own idea, of course, since he needed a front in case of emergencies, and she was quite willing to serve in that capacity---and by the turn of the century, he had turned the bulk of the work over to her, leaving contact with the clients and "training" his thieves under his control, and even then some of the responsibility had become hers. She had used the more subtle art of submissive manipulation, learned in her mortal life of serving ineffectual aristocrats, to make herself indispensable to him, and he had gone to his final death certain of her loyalty.

More fool him...

Scully's mention of Ann Marie pulled Sally back to the monitors, and she watched "Nick" float down with Ann Marie's body in his arms and lay her carefully on the sofa. There was true regret in the agent's voice when she spoke. "I tried to talk to her, but she seemed intent on killing me. It was an accident."

"I know, Dana. Sometimes there's nothing..." The newcomer straightened, his sentence trailing away, and before Sally could guess what he had been distracted by, he announced, "There's someone else in the house...another vampire."

"That's Sally," Mulder told him, Scully almost responding in unison. "She's...sort of on our side, I think."

Well, that's damning with faint praise, she thought with a wry chuckle, and flipped the transmit toggle for that room. "Thank you for that ringing endorsement, Mr. Mulder. I'll be up shortly. Please ask your friend not to shoot me when I come in." Not waiting for an answer, she brought the darkened monitors back up, switched the system to automatic and tried not to run up the stairs.

Scully glanced up at the camera, then turned back to

Mulder. "I knew someone was watching, but I didn't expect a sound monitor, too." She came closer to the chair he had managed to haul himself into, alert to the slight pallor, erratic heartbeat and odd scent. *Like stale adrenaline.* "How are you feeling?" she asked in a quiet tone, leaning over him.

The grin he flashed her was forced. "Been better," he replied in an equally low, if strained, tone. "I think the last two days just caught up with me. I'm okay, but right now I feel like a Jello Jiggler."

She slid her hand into his and was mindful to give it a "light" squeeze. Her first impulse had been a more reassuring hug, remembering when he had calmed her with the same after her rescue from Donnie Pfaster, but she felt the Thirst gnawing at her controls and couldn't trust her hold over the vampire at the moment. The look between them was sufficient to complete the gesture.

"Dana, do you still have your phone?" Nick asked. "I need to call Natalie, tell her everyone's okay." *And give us something else to think about besides...that...for a few minutes.*

"Sure." She pulled the phone from its casing on her belt, punched a few buttons, and passed it to the detective. The conversation was brief, but very productive, because the pathologist had a breakthrough to report when they got back.

After he hung up and gave the unit back, Knight began to ask what Mulder knew about Sally, but the opening library door and her entrance cut him off. Her gaze fell on him first, flickered to the crossbow lying on the chair with its clip of sharpened wooden dowel quarrels, then returned to him. She spread her empty hands and asked, "Do I surrender to you, sir, or the FBI?"

He nodded toward the agents and countered with an equally dry "This is their jurisdiction; I'm from out of town. Is anyone else in the house?"

"No, no one." She looked to Scully next, who stood between her and Mulder, took three steps forward and held out her right hand, palm up, with a somber "'We be of one blood, ye and I'." She smiled a little shyly at the almost pretentious quotation, but she had always wanted to use the Jungle Book greeting for any vampire of Soares' making that she felt she could talk to. "I'm Sally."

"Agent Dana Scully," she replied, taking the older vampire's hand to shake it, but Sally covered Scully's hand with her left and pressed gently, an old-style courtesy among women. A glance down at the puncture marks on the fledgling's wrist revealed where the blood on her mouth had come from. "Ann Marie told me you were Mr. Soares' secretary."

"Among other duties." The reference to her late employer caused Sally to eye the body sprawled on the floor, and a sudden decision sent her to one of the wall displays. Hefting a small war axe, she strode toward the corpse.

"What are you doing?" Scully demanded, blocking Sally's path. Nick moved to join the agent, then stopped when he realized the other woman's intent.

"It has to be done," Sally explained. "To make sure he can't rise again. That, or leave him out in the sunlight. Myself, I'd rather not have the neighbors calling the authorities about smoke and a body-sized burn mark in my back yard if I can help it." *Besides, I've been wanting to do this for years, and you've already done half the job for me...* "He destroyed Mildred in this fashion, and he would have done the same or worse to you were he still alive." Brown and blue eyes locked for a brief, intense span, then Scully stepped aside. Sally raised the weapon above her head, and noticed Mulder's fixed stare on Soares. *He doesn't want to look away this time, perhaps to assure himself that the nightmare is over...* Calling up the vampire for strength, she brought the razor-edged blade down with a sharp hiss, severing the neck

in one blow. When she looked back at the former captive, he met her gaze and nodded, swallowing hard. *For all of us...*

With sunrise less than two hours away, the three vampires wrapped up the bodies---Ann Marie in a silk bedsheet, Soares in the rug where he fell---and disposed of them far from the house. While Nick flew the late art thief over the Atlantic and dropped him and his head in two different places, the women took Ann Marie to the roof of her favorite jazz club and, scattering white rose petals over her uncovered body, left her for the dawn. "We were not friends," Sally admitted in response to Scully's question, "but I felt I had to send her on her way with some dignity and tenderness, because she had so little of it in her life, and she was the first one I could give it to." Her voice shivered slightly, and she pinched the bridge of her nose in an attempt to compose her emotions. *Not now, not here...*

Scully, respecting the other woman's desire for privacy, kept her distance until they were airborne and en route to the townhouse, when she broached a change in subject. "What will you do, now that Soares' business is shut down?"

Sally heard the implication in the phrasing of the query, and took it for the opportunity the agent offered. She told Scully that, as Soares' secretary and accountant, she had access to all of his files. She would turn over his client records and both his open ledgers and the last ten years of his private ones—*but not the books I kept with the real state of our finances*—and give a carefully edited statement to the authorities about what went on during her period of employment. Then she would set about dismantling his unfinished contracts, refunding advances and issuing anonymous warnings to intended targets. Her official report of his whereabouts would be that he had "gone overseas," which was technically true, and had not told her where he was going or when he would return. Concerning the women, she

would say that they had gone with him, and their personal records would be submitted with the rest of the evidence. They all had carefully-crafted paper trails, to prevent raised eyebrows on even the most wary bureaucrat. *And that's something you'll have to learn to do for yourself, child, when your time comes to move on...*

"You fly very well for someone so new to the life," Sally commented on their landing at the front entrance. "I was three weeks just becoming familiar with thermals."

"I have Nick to thank for that, among other things."

"Ah, yes. You were fortunate in that, having known of vampires in advance by being acquainted with one." She scanned the eastern sky for signs of light while flipping through her keyring. The door had been unlocked on their way out, since she had unbolted it after Scully and Ann Marie entered the library, then shut off the internal and external entrance monitors to hide any intruder activity from Soares when he came into the security room. She hadn't anticipated the library windows being broken, nor Nick making use of the opening, although she had deactivated the motion detectors just in case. Soares knew about security systems, but his trust in Sally's "lack" of creative guile led him to disregard the true status of the console.

"To be honest, if Agent Mulder hadn't known about Detective Knight, I wouldn't have gotten this far, and it took some convincing before I would believe what he was telling me."

"Really?" Sally slipped in the second key and turned, then motioned Scully inside. "Was it the hunger or the fangs?"

"Sunlight."

Ow! You poor dear! She winced in sympathy, remembering the few times she had been burned, and headed for the kitchen to put up the groceries she had purchased for

Mulder at an all-night supermarket, the same store where they had gotten the roses for the impromptu funeral.

Nick and Mulder were already occupying the room when the women entered. Before they had left on their respective errands, Sally had made sure her "younger sister"'s Thirst was satisfied and had given her other guests permission to raid the refrigerator, and she was encouraged to see them taking advantage of the offer. *I owe them more than hospitality, but this will have to do for now.*

"I was wondering how close you were going to cut it," the detective commented from his seat at the small dining table, his fingers rubbing the stem of a wine glass with a few teaspoons of blood remaining in the bowl. He had told Sally that any of the "emergency" blood taken from mortals killed during the break-ins would have to be confiscated, and while he could drink anything else available, Scully could only have "non-fatal" blood, revealing her transitional state and their search for a cure. Luckily, Sally had procured some from a blood bank---for when she "got the craving for a more subtle flavor," she explained--- and stored them in a hidden area in the basement.

Mulder, damp hair slicked back from a long-delayed shower, looked up from studying the scant choice of human food available in the cupboard, tightened the sash on his borrowed bathrobe and turned to help Sally unpack the new supplies. His eyes widened in pleased surprise when he pulled out a small bag of shelled sunflower seeds, and when their gazes met, she tilted her head toward his partner, indicating that it had been at her suggestion. "Well, thanks, whoseever idea it was," he concluded, selecting a pre-made deli sandwich, potato salad and a soda for the rest of his dinner---having had two meals in so many days, he was careful not to overdo--- and put the rest away before speaking again. "There's something I'd like to ask you... y'know, you've

never really told us your last name. Your real one, I mean. What should we call you, besides 'Sally'?"

Her reaction, from her expression, was unexpected: thoughtfulness, followed by confusion, then an almost sad amusement. "To be honest, Mr. Mulder, I can't seem to remember. I heard it so rarely during my childhood, and when I entered service at thirteen, I was always addressed by my Christian name, when I was called anything at all. After I became a vampire---" she shrugged---"we used so many names in all the documents I had to keep track of in traveling and our series of domiciles, that one surname meant no more to me than another. If my late, unlamented employer knew it, or those of the other two, he never used them in either our infrequent dealings with our fellow vampires or the few mortal social gatherings we were allowed to attend."

"So the three of you were his prisoners," Nick observed, his hackles rising at the thought of such treatment. *No vampire master I ever knew would enslave his creations that way. Not even LaCroix was that controlling...*

Sally's reply was flat and grimly direct. "We were his property, Detective Knight. Well-tended property, but property nonetheless." She shifted her focus on Mulder and added, "You asked if I was one of Soares' 'brides'. Even though you meant it in jest, in a sense, I was. Because of the culture he was accustomed to, a slave, a servant or a wife were all one to him: someone to make his life easier, to be ordered about. Aye, and even to die if he desired it."

"So Mildred wasn't the first person he'd executed," Mulder ventured. Sally nodded. "Well, at least she was the last."

"Directly so, that's true," she agreed, opening a bottle of her special stock and pouring a glass for Scully and herself. "Indirectly, however, he was responsible for Ann Marie's death as well. You see, while he did not overtly pit us against

each other, Soares didn't encourage any of us to become friends. No, dear, take it," she insisted at Scully's refusal of the offered goblet. "A glass or two just before bed makes one less...peckish?...after a day's sleep. I'm sure your teacher would concur." When the other woman accepted, Sally went back to the previous subject. "He feared the chance we might plot against him if we did, but he was confident that none of us was bright enough on her own to outsmart him. While he didn't think much of his fellow man, mortal or vampire, he set even less store by the intelligence of the...'weaker' sex."

"That explains why he was shoveling that speech at Scully," Mulder put in after swallowing a mouthful of turkey club. "I almost blew the possum act when he tried to be poetic." He rolled his eyes toward his partner. "I'm surprised you were able to keep a straight face through all that."

"I've had a lot of practice," she admitted, lifting the glass for a sip. Mulder raised his bottle at the same time, then froze when the point of the jibe hit home.

Sally caught the meaning under that little interaction, and sighed wistfully to herself. *What I wouldn't have given to have somebody to tease with! It would have made the last 150-odd years so much more bearable.* "As for the others, I'm sure Mildred felt that if I were no longer in a position of influence, she would command the lion's share of attention, which, considering her former career as a circus aerialist, was her greatest desire. That, and her appetite for expensive clothing and baubles. He tolerated her greed, because that was the easiest way to control her. Ann Marie, on the other hand, was not very ambitious. All she wanted was a measure of approval and someone to take care of her. Our maker gave her that, but he put a condition on it. He assigned her the responsibility of keeping Mildred out of trouble, but denied her the authority to enforce obedience. Even

if he had, she lacked the stomach for confrontation..."

"She was certainly willing to confront me," Scully interrupted.

"Yes, but that's because she was pushed beyond endurance by what's happened in the past week. Soares made no secret that you were to be accorded a special status once he brought you into the fold---probably second only to his for as long as you amused him---bypassing the rules of hierarchy. She might have learned to live with that, providing you weren't part of the 'acquisition team', which was Mildred and her. Of course, when Mildred died for breaking the rules and attacking Agent Mulder, it left Ann Marie alone at the bottom rung, faced with taking orders from a fledgling, and that she could not bear."

"So what did you want?" Nick asked, settling back in his chair. At Sally's quizzical look, he elaborated. "You said Mildred wanted attention; Ann Marie, acceptance. What did you want that would have brought you across into this existence?" *Her answer may give me a clue to whether she can be trusted...*

"Ah." She swirled the dark liquid around in her goblet, coating the sides with a thin red film while she considered her answer. "If you had asked me that when it happened, when I was a common housemaid with no future but in service, I would have said 'freedom'. Time and experience has changed that, but now I have what I truly wanted, and you've given it to me, for which I am forever grateful."

"Which is?"

She tilted the glass to her mouth with a wry smile. "I outlived the bastard."

Scully choked on her drink.

After Mulder thumped his fellow agent on the back a few times until her throat cleared, he said, "I guess it's true, then, that living well is the best revenge."

Sally let out a sigh of satisfaction. "Yes, Mr. Mulder, and I shall live very well." She tossed back the last of the blood in her glass, set it in the sink, and announced, "Dawn will break soon, and I should see to your sleeping arrangements. I'll be but a few minutes."

"You don't need to go to all that trouble," Nick protested as she headed for the door leading to the hall. "You're not a servant anymore."

"No, but I am mistress of this house, and my duty is to my guests." She exited the room before he could argue the point.

Scully gestured for silence, although neither man seemed about to speak. She listened, head cocked, until the sound of footsteps grew too faint to hear, then asked softly, "So the question is, can she be trusted?"

"To do what?" Mulder countered, spooning up some potato salad.

"To hand over all the relevant data on Soares' business dealings. Not to pick up where he left off." She paused, loathe to mention her next suspicion, as if talking about it would make it so. "Not to have you for a mid-day snack while we're asleep."

Mulder stopped chewing at that point, but while he tried to swallow in order to answer, Nick beat him to it by briefing her on what Mulder had told him about the last two days, and that Sally had been instrumental in keeping the agent alive. "Speaking from experience," he concluded, "I get the sense that she wants to put this behind her, to complete her independence. She'll cooperate as far as she's able, if for no other reason than to be left alone. If she kept his books, there were likely two sets that he knew about, and maybe a third detailing her own finances. I doubt it's any more illegal than any other vampire's records of possessions, but the IRS would probably ask a lot of questions about fund trans-

fers and real estate holdings. It's something you're going to have to consider setting up for yourself in case a cure can't be found." Scully started a little at hearing that pronouncement, revealing to Nick that, although she had accepted her condition, the long-term reality of it was still an abstraction to her. "I hope it won't come to that, either, but you strike me as too practical not to plan for that possibility."

"So, do all vampires have Swiss bank accounts?" she asked, a tone of bitter resignation lacing the attempt at humor.

"Many of us live hand-to-mouth existences, while others have assets in small, scattered caches to use when necessary. But more than a few of us were either lucky or smart enough to acquire sizable nest eggs. And she's been careful too long to attack Mulder on a whim, especially with adequate supplies in the house..."

"...And two other vampires who would raise a stink if she did," Mulder pointed out, pinching a few seeds from the bag.

Sally returned ten minutes later and escorted the trio to the now-vacated bedrooms. Following vampire protocol, she gave Soares' quarters to Nick, since he was the eldest among them. Her more practical reason was that his minimal contact with the late vampire master would carry fewer unpleasant associations. Mildred's longer bed would suit Mulder's tall frame better than Ann Marie's, their host explained, and she had picked up the majority of the feminine clutter Mildred left lying about in typical artistic humor. She was relieved when the agent did not object to sleeping in the bed of the woman who had come within inches of feasting on him, attributing the man's acceptance to his cool demeanor and the training his job required. She sensed Scully's emotional distance in the polite way she thanked Sally for their accommodations, and was careful not to push

too hard. *I think she still sees our maker when she looks at me, and I can't blame her for feeling that way. She didn't ask to be brought across...* She performed her usual patrol of the house, covered the broken window, activated the blackout shields in the rest of the house before falling into bed herself, too tired to change into her customary sleepwear and too depressed to care. She felt the sun rise on the other side of the wall, heard the traffic rumble by the house and the voices of mortals beginning their day as her kind was ending theirs. She let the cold tears she had held in earlier soothe her burning eyes and aching heart. *Even though I'd planned to be free of him, I expected to have someone else remaining in the "family" when it happened. I never thought I'd be the last of my bloodline...*

Scully woke in a troubled mood at sundown, confused by bizarre dreams and a scrambled series of emotions that punctuated her slumber. She pondered on it while she showered and changed into one of Ann Marie's more restrained outfits, and decided that she had been reaching out unconsciously to Mulder to make sure of his safety, then, when her intrusion began to disturb his sleep, she withdrew to Nick for confirmation. Parts of the rest, however, remained a mystery.

She set it aside for study later and went looking for Sally.

She found the blonde Englishwoman at the computer, copying disks of Soares' business files, and was startled by the complete change in appearance. Gone was the severe hairstyle and almost dowdy clothing: fawn-colored waves now spilled over the shoulders and down the back of a smartly tailored black-on-black suit dress with a six-inch slit up the knee-length skirt and an antique silver and jet Victorian pin on the lapel. She glanced up at the newcomer, and Scully noticed the brighter application of cosmetics and

thought, *How old was she when she became a vampire: seventeen? Nineteen? She looks like she's almost college-age, not early to mid-thirties as she seemed before.* "Good evening," she said, her voice neutral, still bothered by an uneasiness she felt when she was around the other woman.

"Good evening," Sally replied. "Det. Knight is going through Soares' personal papers and correspondence, and Agent Mulder hasn't risen yet. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Not just yet, thank you. You were right; feeding just before sleep takes the edge off the hunger when one gets up." She approached the desk casually, forcing herself not to rush over to make certain that Sally was not doctoring the files before handing them over. She saw nothing clearly out of the ordinary, but knew it would take an agent with experience in corporate crime to detect any clerical anomalies. *So if she doesn't seem to be cooking the books under our noses, why do I think she's up to something? I'm starting to sound like Mulder with his hunches...wait, she said Mulder wasn't up yet. Maybe she...* With a reflex thought that she would have considered impossible more than a week ago, she felt for the blood-bond, biting back a gasp of alarm when she sensed no reaction to her call. Memory and reason, however, gave her an answer: *Nick had said that the connection would fade over time, and only another feeding, urgent need or unconscious intention would reawaken the awareness. I could sense both of them last night when we were asleep, so it must be out of conscious range...* Sally's voice cut into her musings, and she had to ask their host to repeat her question.

"I was wondering about Det. Knight's assertion that you should have no blood taken from the dying. Do you really think that not having killed will allow you to cross back over?"

"I believe it's possible." She gave a non-medical ex-

planation of how the vampiric lifeform acted in the body, what had happened when introduced to fatally-drawn blood, and its failure to survive when exposed to the hybrid organism in a marked human. She was almost finished when the drawing room door opened and Mulder entered, wearing clothes a few inches shorter than usual. Seeing him awake and apparently normal, she tried not to breathe a sigh of relief.

Out of sheer habit, Mulder's gaze targeted first on his partner, and he took in the borderline punk outfit for a few seconds before commenting, "Kind of a new look for you, isn't it, Scully?" As she began to form a reply, he shifted attention to the room's third occupant and blinked in surprise. "Now that's a big change. Welcome to the twentieth century."

"Thank you." Sally's smile was wider and more ingenuous than Mulder recalled from their first encounters, and he took that to be a sign that she was comfortable enough in their presence to show her true personality. "I decided that, since I no longer need the servant façade, I don't have to dress like someone's grandmother. Modern fashion, however, has no standards for funerary garb, so I had to piece something together from my paltry street wardrobe. Does this look appropriate?" She included both agents in her inquiring look and turned in her chair to reveal the rest of her ensemble.

Scully was about to reassure Sally on her choices, but Mulder's approving remarks caused a sharp twinge in Scully's upper jaw, a warning that her fangs had descended, and she could not trust her voice at the moment. Excusing herself quickly, she went out into the hall and made for the kitchen.

Nick met her at the foot of the staircase. "What's the matter?" he asked, somewhat alarmed. "I could sense you

from upstairs and halfway across the house."

She blinked up at him, surprised. "I-I was hungry," was her uncertain reply.

"No. I wouldn't have been able to pick up simple hunger," he countered with a headshake. "I came down to see what was going on, half-expecting you and Sally to be at each other's throats...literally. So, what's got your back up about her?"

"Nothing." She tried to dismiss his question, but found herself listening automatically for the voices in the parlor.

"Dana, remember who you're talking to."

"I don't know," she snapped, suppressed irritation rising to a safe target. "I just...don't trust her under the same roof with Mulder." At that sudden confession, the rest came spilling out. "I didn't feel like this when we were taking care of Ann Marie, but when we returned to the house..."

"You didn't want her near him, right?" He didn't wait for her nod. "Is that the way you felt about me when I crossed your threshold Monday morning?" He could almost see the gears spin wildly in her head as she remembered and made the connection, thinking *Bingo!* when realization dawned. "Vampires are a territorial bunch. That's why we have that rule about the humans we've taken from. It prevents our fighting over food sources, and there are few enough of us already without blood-challenges thinning the population further."

Scully sighed and nodded concurrence while they continued toward the kitchen, but something within her still balked at the thought of Sally and Mulder alone together. It took two full glasses and persistence of will to quiet her darker self's possessive clamor, and she felt more in control on her return to the parlor.

As she approached the door, she heard Mulder say,

"...started to ask you earlier, but we got side-tracked. I know you could have waited until Scully joined your dysfunctional little threesome and persuaded her later on to help you deal with Soares."

"I could have, yes."

"But you risked being found out to protect my partner and me, and you didn't warn him about Nick---I saw the security system, and figured you had to have seen him---so what I want to know is: why?"

"Why?"

"Why take the chance of the rescue going wrong, when he would've been dead eventually?"

"Ah. Well, Agent Mulder, I also saw what happened to the storage door downstairs after your first visit, and I wanted to know what would have inspired that sort of loyalty."

Scully lifted her hand from the doorknob as if it had shocked her, then moved quickly and quietly to the basement without waiting for Mulder's reply to Sally's observation.

She came back up many minutes later, somewhat rattled by what she saw, but she collected herself in time to reenter the parlor with an outward calm.

"Good, you're back," Sally greeted her, scooping up a dozen sheets of hard copy and offering them to Scully. "Agent Mulder has suggested we tell the authorities that Soares was connected to the older burglaries as a junior partner who struck out on his own, hiring the three of us between six and nine years ago. That way we have a continuity with some of the older files I just 'happened to find'. We can say Soares used records stolen from his employer to set up his clientele, and this way Interpol and some of the European and Asian authorities can close some of their cases from the 1940's and '50s. We always took a fifteen to twenty-year

holiday between work cycles, lying low until the hunters moved on to fresher game."

Scully examined the printout, marveling at the variety of transactions and the amounts of money paid to acquire items that would only be seen by a privileged few. *And people died for these...things.* "How are we going to tie the murders into this? It was, after all, one of the reasons this case was handed over to us."

"With the blood," Mulder put in, "and the tools Mildred and Ann Marie used to take it. The idea that a group of art thieves might be collecting human blood like trophies could distract the other law enforcement agencies from the lack of hard evidence on how the burglars gained entrance to the heavily-guarded places. I mean, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to figure out how a couple of vampires could pull it off, but since everybody knows vampires exist wholly in fiction..." He shrugged, letting her fill in the rest.

So we come back with a plausible report, with a few minor unanswered questions, and the case is closed to all known intents and purposes. "I just think it's a little odd to see you on the other side of a coverup for once," she commented in what she hoped was a light tone to mute the sting of perceived criticism.

Mulder's hazel eyes narrowed as he looked at her sharply, then returned to their normal half-lidded, sardonic position. "Nice to know I can still surprise you." *The truth won't bring back the dead, and will hurt the living---and undead---far more than misdirection and lies of omission. I know the difference, Dana, more than you give me credit for.*

Sally heard the underlying conflict in the pair's otherwise civil banter, but pretended to be oblivious. And I even envy you your arguments, young one. I could never let my feelings go very far from their cage when I was around the others. If Soares ever knew how much hate I swallowed with

each "yes, sir," he would have pushed and pushed until I snapped, and then Mildred would have realized her fondest ambition, and perhaps even held it for a while.

"I see you've chosen a surname: Dickinson," Scully noted, turning her attention back to the papers. "Can I presume literary inspiration?"

"You may. I always did like her turn of phrase for natural imagery, and I find myself wanting to express a little irony right now." *I was right: she does have an affinity for reading. It would have been nice to have someone else around with similar interests...*

Scully nodded. "I can understand the need to be somebody, after all that's happened." She's been "nobody" for so many years...I don't think I could have tolerated it that long.

"Sally Dickinson, C.P.A." The older vampire tested it aloud for her audience, smiling at the rhythm of the syllables. "Sounds quite run-of-the-mill and ordinary, don't you think? Just enough to let me disappear when this is over. After that, well, I have a mountain of literary allusions to plunder, and hopefully enough time to use all of the good ones."

Mulder left to raid the kitchen, returning several minutes behind Nick, who came down with a cardboard box full of the kind of incriminating evidence that the mortal authorities would happily sift through and catalog and not raise an eyebrow over. The rest, he announced, he would turn it over to several vampire acquaintances of his for investigations on behalf of the community.

"Some of these might have been stolen from mortals who acquired them after some of us had to leave them behind. I know because I recognize at least three of mine and two of a friend's. We won't be able to reclaim them as our original property, since decades to centuries have passed

since we owned them, but we can make offers to buy if we wish. Did he ever steal for other vampires, or from other vampires?"

"No. His assertion was that if they wanted it, they could get it themselves, and the risk of being found out was greater among our own kind, since we kept the same hours and knew the signs of vampiric presence. Theft more than once removed, however, held no qualms for him."

"How considerate," Nick snorted as he handed a sheaf of envelopes to Scully and one of receipts to Mulder, who flipped through his while calling home and office for his messages. Knight had found the agent's cell-phone on Soares' nightstand, an apparent trophy of conquest.

Mulder was chuckling as he hung up and, at Scully's quizzical look, explained, "Langley pulled a report off the Internet about sightings of what appeared to be human-sized forms over D.C. and Maryland. Speculation seems to run in the direction of CIA or Naval testing of stealth jetpacks, since no sound could be heard as they passed. You know what this means, don't you?"

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but go ahead."

"Technically, you're now a U.F.O." The woman rolled her eyes and went back to reading as her partner arched an amused brow at Nick, including him in this bit of news. After several minutes of quiet study, Mulder directed a question at their host. "Sally, once your part in the investigation is finished, what do you plan to do for the next couple of decades?"

She paused in the middle of duplicating the second set of ledgers and put on a thoughtful face. "I've given it some consideration, and I suppose I could find work in an accounting firm, although I'm frightfully overqualified for an entry position, and I know I look too young for anything higher. Self-employed accountants are more proliferous than

lawyers, so hanging up my own shingle would be a waste of money and energy. Then again, there's always work in the public sector, and I hear they're eager to hire minorities." Nick coughed at that one. "Given my little hobby in the next room, I could always open a used and rare book shop." A sudden memory twitched her mouth into a smile, and she added, "But if none of those are to my liking, I could always retire to a little place in Sussex and keep bees." The Doyle reference, intended to elicit a reaction from Scully, found its target in her partner instead and got a dry bark of laughter in response. *I should look into finding myself a mortal companion. The community may not like it, but the intellectual stimulation could be worth bending a few rules.*

With the preliminary evidence collected, and the basement "guest room" cluttered with boxes from another storage area to divert attention from its former purpose, the trio was ready to leave. The official story and timetable had been worked out between them and their host: Mulder had gone to Philadelphia the day before and met Soares' secretary and bookkeeper, who was the house's lone occupant at the time. Scully, working with the two Canadians on the forensic data---called in because of their "experience in a similar case"---had found some disturbing indications of pathological behavior beyond burglary and murder. Mulder confirmed this in the "discovery" of the bottles of blood, which Ms. Dickinson showed him with the claim that, while she was aware of the contents, she had presumed that the blood came from a slaughterhouse, and that her employer used it as "some sort of holistic medical treatment". Any visible trace of Soares' blood had been cleaned and covered by another rug, and enough clothing and suitcases were packed to make the departure of the art thieves seem plausible. It would be assumed that they left the country under false names, and the closing of Mildred's and Ann Marie's accounts would suggest

that they used the cash for initial traveling expenses to cover their tracks out of the U.S., leaving their accountant behind to face the hunters. Sally would hand over enough identification and access codes to keep the investigators on both sides of the Atlantic busy, but she would imply that her employer may have hidden certain money caches from her, giving them false scents to chase for years and enhancing her image as an honest bookkeeper forced into illegal activity by a psychotic criminal.

"Many of his known holdings were put in my name, but I'll sign them over to the state to do with as they will. I have enough invested from my own property that I can live comfortably, and since I would hope to be granted certain immunities for turning government evidence, they will not inspect my assets too closely." *The one thing I truly want to keep is my book collection, which will be impounded as his property, but which I can have bought for me through several brokers at the next government auction.*

Scully nodded, her own sense of justice squirming at the number of loopholes available in the realm of white-collar financial legerdemain, but she was all too aware that whatever gray areas Sally took advantage of were compensation enough for what Soares forced her to do. *And much as I dislike being an accomplice to withholding evidence, the alternative would have a more destructive domino effect. Maybe that's why Mulder's going along with this...*

It was almost two when they walked down the front steps of the house, with Sally standing at the threshold as if seeing off the last of the party guests. She slipped a small key off her ring and passed it and a piece of paper to Nick, explaining, "The oldest of his records are in a storage locker at that facility. He kept them to refer to when a client wanted something he'd taken from another. I'll send what's here to the address you gave me. Once again, thank you, Detective

Knight."

He shifted the box under his arm and took the items, holding her hand long enough to squeeze the fingers encouragingly. "You're welcome. It's too bad we couldn't have met under more pleasant circumstances."

"Perhaps we can remedy that when I visit Toronto. I hear it's a beautiful city." At his nod, she turned to Mulder and said, "You were the catalyst that forced me to act, Agent Mulder, and I am in your debt. If there is anything you need, let me know."

He shook his head faintly, ready to dismiss the offer, then the memory of their first conversation surfaced, and his mouth twitched with dry humor. "How about some gingerbread?"

Her spurt of answering laughter at the apparent nonsequitor took the other two by surprise, but neither she nor Mulder offered an explanation. "Done." Her manner sobered a little as she looked at her remaining guest. "I admit that I don't completely regret the events that brought you here, but as much as I wish you could remain bloodkin, I do hope you find your cure. This life is not an easy one, and had I know where it would lead me, I'd have chosen otherwise." She extended her hands in farewell, a wistful smile on her lips.

"Thank you, and if we can reverse Detective Knight's condition..." Scully's offer of the same treatment froze in her throat as she clasped the older vampire's hands, the physical contact becoming a channel for a deluge of emotions that she recognized from yesterday's sleep. *This was the other presence...* Sally, bereft of the focus that had sustained her for over a century, was feeling the aftereffects of her newly-won freedom: isolation. She had no one to connect to, not even to spar with, and the thought of being truly alone was eroding her composure. Amber and turquoise eyes met, tears in

the latter threatening to spill over from embarrassment and despair, and Scully did the only thing she could think of to console the woman: she put her arms around Sally and pulled the blonde head onto her shoulder. She felt the grief wash through her, stirring up memories of her father and sister, and she smoothed the turmoil by projecting images of calm and reassurance, repeating silently *Not alone, never alone...we are here...*

After a minute, Sally's trembling stopped, and she added a brief but intense hug of gratitude before drawing back. She mouthed a "thank you" as Scully pressed their hands together in an echo of their first meeting, then stepped away and joined her partner.

"Ready?" Scully asked, slipping an arm around Mulder's ribcage.

He did the same to her and tightened his grip on the bags holding their clothes. "Whenever you are. Whoa!" The sudden upward motion and weightlessness was like riding an express elevator, and it took a second for his stomach to catch up. He bit back the impulse to let out a slacker-like "Cool!" settling on a more conservative "It's a good thing I was unconscious the first time; I'd rather have this be a pleasant but short-lived experience." He glanced over at Nick, flying parallel to them, and waved with his bag-laden hand.

"Thanks, but don't move around too much. I've never done this before."

"Well, I'm not worried. If Christopher Reeve can do it, I figure you can, too."

"Yes, but he had a flying harness."

"True, but did Margot Kidder?"

F.B.I. Headquarters—June 24, 1:25 P.M.

Skinner settled back in his chair, met the gaze of the agent seated on the other side of the desk, then shifted his attention to the folder lying between them. "The Soares case has been handed over to the I.R.S. and various overseas agencies, now that you've determined that the capital offenses related to the case had nothing of an unusual nature to require further investigation. Is that correct?"

"I wouldn't say that the offenses weren't unusual, sir," Mulder corrected, his deadpan face and tone of voice masking his attitude toward the irony of the situation. "Just not inexplicable enough for an X-file." Sally had kept him and Scully informed of the questions the Philadelphia police, the I.R.S. and Interpol had asked her, in addition to the answers she gave and the evidence they collected. Pictures, aliases and descriptions of Soares and his two accomplices had been faxed to all airports and hotels, and various collectors, museum officials and art brokers were being detained for interrogation in several countries. She had given the authorities the names and addresses of not only Soares' clients and his "senior partners, but also those who had helped them steal the items. Mulder suspected that press conferences would follow in the wake of the arrests, and that the general public would be abuzz with the extent of the thefts for about three weeks before moving on to more exciting news. *Of course, if they knew what <u>really</u> happened....*

Skinner let the comment pass unacknowledged and went to his next question. "Has Ms. Dickinson talked to the Federal Marshal's office about witness protection?"

"No, and although she is aware of her former employer's violent nature, she feels that he'll be too busy running from the law to search for her. To be on the safe side, however, she would like to arrange for new identity papers. Beyond that, she doesn't need anything else."

"She does understand that she'll need a contact."

"Yes, sir. Agent Scully and I will maintain periodic contact with her. She asked for us specifically, so we'll coordinate with the Marshall's office to keep tabs on her." While he spoke, he removed two folded sheets of paper from his breast pocket and laid them on the file portfolio.

The director's brow furrowed at the new addition and the meaningful look on Mulder's face, then he picked up the square and opened it. In the same typefont as the official report, topped by the *words <u>In</u> case someone's listening*, the page began with:

Soars and his accomplices are dead.

Skinner glanced up sharply at the bearer of this news, then, getting no reaction, he continued to read. The first two-thirds of the text recounted what had actually happened between the nineteenth and the twenty-first without going into specific detail about the three deaths. Soares was blamed for Mildred's and Ann Marie's murders, and his own demise was described as an act committed in defense of a fellow officer.

Sally's part in Mulder's rescue and help with the evidence was stressed, but no mention was made of her being a vampire. There had been some discussion on that subject, with Scully, Natalie and Nick arguing on the side of need-to-know and Mulder playing devil's advocate. He agreed eventually, noting that, should circumstances require disclosure, "we'll blow up that bridge when we come to it."

The bottom half of the second page was an update on Natalie's and Scully's research, with a request for use of one of the monitored interrogation rooms in the basement, explaining that they needed a controlled environment for the first in a series of treatments, where proximity to the lab and the availability of restraints were essential points in reversing the effects of vampirism.

When he reached the end, Skinner re-read the last

part carefully before putting it on the desk and staring at it and the file. He weighed the old and new information and their particular ramifications in his mind, then made a decision. Grabbing a pen, he circled part of the second page and wrote a few words, then handed the sheet back.

Hoping for the best and expecting the worst, Mulder turned the paper around and located the addition. The request had been highlighted, with *Approved* written in the margin, and four words below it: *But I want in.*

Mulder looked up from the page into his supervisor's uncompromising expression, spared a quick glimpse at his watch and realized that he would have to make this decision on his own. *She's unconscious right now.* He considered her and the others' response to this change in plans for a few seconds, then nodded.

Skinner inclined his head once, slid the first page toward Mulder and punched a key on his phone. "Kimberly, could you get me today's schedule for the interview rooms?"

June 25; 2:00 A.M.

As he stood in the viewing chamber connected to Interview Room One and watched Dr. Lambert ready the first injection, Skinner entertained second thoughts about insisting on being a witness to what he had always thought was confined to the realm of horror movies. The target of the experiment had not been comfortable with his attendance, but since she had asked for his help and his silence, she would have to accept his presence as part of the package. In addition to being responsible for approving the unorthodox use of federal facilities for the past few days, he had to see this case to its conclusion, for his own peace of mind, to know that Scully's bizarre condition was rooted in explainable, controllable science.

But that doesn't mean I have to like it.

His attention shifted to the sandy-haired man standing opposite the doctor. Det. Knight had been introduced as Lambert's associate and a fellow specialist in this "field of research". Skinner wondered, however, whether the officer's knowledge came through academia or personal experience. *He's a little too intent on her every move and making sure everything's accounted for, and he's almost as pale as Scully. Shouldn't presume, though; I have enough to deal with already without seeing vampires around every corner.*

"Sir?" Mulder asked, sitting in one of the front-row chairs and offering a small key from his pocket. When Skinner looked at it in question, the agent explained. "For these." He dangled a set of handcuffs from two fingers. "We're taking a lot of precautions, given the nature of the medication and what the vampire organism might do when the hybrids attack it. If it tries to call me in there to feed it, I'd rather be tied up at the moment. I've been through this before, and I don't want a repeat performance, so no matter what I say or do, don't let me go in there until it's over."

Skinner nodded, took the object, speculating, "Will chaining her to the table be enough?" while Mulder passed one bracelet under the chair seat and snapped the cuffs on both wrists.

"Det. Knight seems to think so." He glanced up to see Scully test her own restraints---a pair for each hand---and confer with Nick on their strength. The intercom had been left open so that either side could communicate easily. His heart picked up speed as the hypo descended toward Scully's forearm, wincing empathetically as he imagined the needle entering the flesh. *I hate shots...*

"Okay, let me know the instant you feel any change," they heard Natalie's voice over the speaker while she leaned

forward in the seat next to Scully and listened through the stethoscope. Skinner saw Nick step closer, seemingly alert for a sudden reaction, and he kept an edge-of-sight eye on Mulder while monitoring the treatment.

"Nothing so far...I do feel a little warm, but that could be from the direct exposure to the blood." The syringe contained a mixture of hybrids bred from Scully's proto-organisms and plasma filtered from a pint of donor blood, suspended in an ounce of sterile water. They had decided on the lowest dosage possible, to prevent a repeat of Nick's problem with the hormone. She sat still as Natalie waited for one of the six-an-hour pair of beats they had been told was normal for vampires, the rest of the group maintaining a watchful silence. Two minutes later, Scully muttered, "Dizzy... my head hurts a little...oh..." and drew in a harsh breath.

"Where does it...?" Lambert began, then jerked back when her patient turned on her, snarling.

Nick was halfway to Natalie the instant Scully gasped and dragged her out of reach of the vampire's snapping fangs with inches to spare. Denied, Scully yanked hard on her cuffs, then twisted the loop the other bracelets were attached to until it one of its bolts was pulled out. Once free, she paused long enough to shove her chair in Nick's path as he moved to grab her, then she vaulted over the table.

Skinner's surprise at her transformation was interrupted by Mulder's increasingly frantic attempts to pull his hands out of his own restraints, and as the director turned to prevent the younger man from injuring himself, the reverberating slam against the one-way mirror wrenched his attention back to the other room. Scully, sensing mortal blood on the opposite side, had thrown herself at the glass like an insane bird, her eyes bright scarlet with need and pain, screaming "MULDER!" and pounding on the barrier be-

tween them. Skinner glanced away immediately, remembering the tales of vampires and hypnotic stares, just as Nick appeared and pinned her arms down by wrapping his own around her. Her kicks and shrieks of rage and Nick's shouting at her and Natalie was matched by Mulder howling her name and lugging the chair with him to the door.

"Mulder, sit down!" Skinner ordered, seizing the agent by the shoulder and the chair by the back and shoving the first into the second, almost overbalancing them onto the floor. He righted the chair and held both in place with one foot on a rung and a hand clamped on Mulder's forearm.

As he stared at the battle next door, Mulder's reply seemed coherent, but it was directed at no one in particular. "No-you-don't-understand-I-have-t'get-to-her-she-needs-me-she's-hurting-can't-you-hear-her-God-they're-killing-her-they-want-to-kill-her-I'm-the-only-one-who-can-help-you-have-to-let-me-in-there-she's-dying-please-let-me-in-there...." The rest was lost in his struggle with the cuffs and semi-hysterical crying.

I was warned about the "blood-bond," but I didn't think it was this bad. "Mulder, listen to me," Skinner broke in, using his calm, authoritative voice in an effort to break through. "They're trying to help her. We're all trying..."

Mulder's response to that was bared teeth in his superior's face and an inhuman growl. "Liar!" he spat, struggling against the larger man's grip.

All right, enough of this. Convinced now that Mulder was beyond reason in his present state, Skinner reached for a spot on the other's neck and pressed. Mulder slumped forward and to one side with a soft moan, and Skinner straightened the unconscious figure into a more comfortable posture before looking up into the interview room.

In an attempt to keep her from wriggling out of his grasp, Nick had bent over the table with Scully beneath him,

using his upper body weight to hold her in place. *Trying to hold her, more like,* he thought as she squirmed and writhed, straining her neck to reach behind her for any part of her captor that she could sink her teeth into. *Can't even shift position; she'll break loose the instant I slacken.* He had sensed the fierce hunger and agony she was feeling from the second she changed, and he found himself walking a shaky tightrope in using his vampiric strength without succumbing to its incessant need for blood. *If I suppress it, I won't be able to hang on to her for long. But if I let the demon out, it'll want to join her in killing every mortal within reach, starting with...* "Nat, get out of here! I can't control her with you in the room!"

Natalie produced another syringe and a small vial from her bag. "Give me just a second," she told him, her voice shaking as she drew a portion of clear fluid into the barrel. "It's a sedative."

"You don't have time for---arrgghhh!" He felt his human side weaken under the tearing pain of Scully's fingernails clawing into his thighs, and it was all he could do to keep from shredding her throat open with his fangs. "GET OUT!!!" he roared, burying his forehead against the back of Scully's neck as he fought his darker instincts.

"It's all right. Just hold her still." The hypodermic loaded, Natalie turned to find the most effective spot to jab---

And saw a pair of red eyes gleaming up at her.

"Natalie, listen," a broken, husky voice thrummed in her mind insistently. "Don't do this. Can't you see he's hurting me? Make him let me go...I can't breathe, Natalie, he's breaking my ribs. He wants to kill me, I know it. Please make him stop..."

"Dana...?"

"Do it!"

The blonde wavered, blinking in confusion, then no-

ticed the object in her right hand. Yes, *I can stop him with this. That's why I prepped it...* She raised the syringe in a double-fisted grip, aimed for the area between his shoulder blades and, ignoring the unintelligible second voice, brought it down hard.

A pair of strong hands on her wrists halted and reversed the plunging needle a foot from its target, and a twist brought it out of her grasp. The distraction of the attack silenced the presence dominating her, and she turned a bewildered gaze up into Skinner's alarmed brown eyes.

"Don't listen, don't look at her. Just go," he ordered, grabbing her by the shoulders and pushing her away from the vampires. Still too stunned by what she had been about to do, Natalie let him guide her to the door.

As the pair reached the threshold, Scully, realizing that she was being cheated of her proper food yet again, let out a banshee wail that rattled the windows. The cry broke off sharply when the weakened vampire gave up all control of its host.

"Nat," Nick said hoarsely, lifting his head as he recovered his own balance, "I can't feel her."

She paused just outside the door. "What?"

"I can't feel her. She's gone."

The news took three seconds to process. "Damn!" She spun around, wresting her elbow from her rescuer's hand and ran for the satchel. She jammed the stethoscope into her ears and asked Skinner, "Do you know CPR?"

"Yes." The reason for the inquiry became evident when he saw Knight ease a now-limp Scully to the floor, and he hurried back to the table, kneeling opposite the doctor. *So much for the question of his being a vampire...*

"Good. You do the compressions; I'll breathe. Nick, you go check on Mulder," she ordered, reading heart

and pulse simultaneously.

"Why Mulder?" Skinner wanted to know.

"He's bound to her, and if her heart's stopped---"

"Got it." He waited until she finished her brief exam, then began heart massage once Lambert made sure Scully's airway was clear. Fifteen compressions, two breaths...one-thousand, two-thousand, three...I have no idea how I'm going to explain this to the OPR if you two die down here...two-thousand, three-thousand...break, one breath...two, and we go again...

Nick returned in the middle of the third cycle to report that Mulder was unconscious, but otherwise fine. Natalie nodded, half-listening, then stopped resuscitation after the fourth to check for vital signs. "No. Can you feel anything, Nick?" His reply was a headshake. "Okay, once more..." Partway through the second round, she caught a twitch in the patient's neck, followed by a thin sharp gasp. "Hold off, she's breathing." Skinner sat back on his heels and watched her reapply the stethoscope. A tense moment of listening, and the slowly-spreading half-smile gave them the answer they waited for. "I've got a beat...about fifteen...picking up speed...it's a little thready." A check for a pulse widened the smile to a grin. "Bingo! Thirty-six and rising, respiration shallow but steady. Dana, can you hear me? Open your eyes if you can."

There was no response for several seconds, then the eyelids fluttered, squeezed together once, and parted to reveal light blue irises. Scully blinked a few times, frowned at her view of the ceiling, and took as deep a breath as she could manage to force the barely-audible words past her larynx. "...On the floor?"

Nick's sharper hearing spared them having to ask for a repetition. "You're on the floor because you passed out. Actually, they had to jump-start you. How do you feel?"

"Tired...everything hurts...it's so quiet..."

Nick echoed her reply, a slight query in the last word, then he realized what she was saying. "You can't hear their hearts or lungs, is that what you mean?" A wobbly nod, and the ends of her mouth tugged upward when the meaning of the silence hit home, and her eyes brimmed in relief.

"Oh, Dana," Natalie cried, leaning over to touch her forehead to Scully's and lay an arm across the other woman in an awkward hug. "It worked!"

Scully tried to return the gesture, but was too weak to do more than bump a hand against Natalie's forearm. When they separated, she looked around for a missing face. "Where's...?" she swallowed and tried again. "Where's Mulder?"

"He's fine," Skinner interjected. Her gaze shifted to him, so he clarified his answer. "He cuffed himself to a chair, but the situation became...difficult and I had to take matters in hand."

Her eyes opened and closed sluggishly, and he thought he saw a trace of another nod and the word 'understand' on her lips. "How much do you remember after the injection?" he asked, anxious to know if she had been aware of the vampire's actions during the minute or so afterward.

Before Scully could ponder the request, Natalie broke in with, "With all due respect, Mr. Skinner, the question-and-answer period should wait until she's stronger." The doctor was in her element, and she knew when to pull rank. A tell-tale shiver from the red-haired agent alerted her to the next stage in Scully's condition. "Help me with the blankets; she's going into shock."

"Cold..." Scully whispered while they rolled her onto a heavy government-issue blanket and covered her with a second. Natalie took blood pressure and temperature readings while her charge's trembling eased, then left to check on

Mulder.

He was awake, if somewhat the worse for wear. "How is she?" were his first words when Lambert entered.

"Chilled, weak as a newborn kitten, but mortal," she announced with a triumphant smile.

"Great," he replied as she began to examine him.

"How do you feel?"

"Kinda lightheaded, actually, like I'd been knocked out by my boss to keep me from becoming my partner's late-night snack."

She snorted a little at that, then her expression sobered. "Do you remember anything?"

The look he gave her was uncomfortable. "Yes." He glanced down at the floor, then at the one-way mirror. "There was a...a need, like fire seeking fuel. It wasn't coming from me, but I had to answer it. Pain, hate---directed at Nick, mostly---and fear. It knew it was dying, and it---no, we---would do anything to keep it alive." A pause. "Is it dead?"

"I won't know until I draw a blood sample, and I won't do that until her vitals are closer to normal." She drew breath to continue, but she was interrupted by Nick's voice over the speaker.

"...Don't worry about it. I heal quickly, and it was an old pair of pants, anyway."

Skinner's voice followed seconds later. "Can I ask, Det. Knight, how many of you are there?"

Silence, then, "Very few, actually, and we like to keep it that way. It's the law of nature: there are always more prey than predators."

"I'd better get back to my other patient," Natalie said, scribbling a few words in her notepad. Waving at the handcuffs, she asked, "Do you have the keys to those on you?"

"No, I gave them to Director Skinner. Is it safe?"
"Should be. I'll send him in."

Once Scully's life signs were strong enough, Natalie took some blood and headed for the lab, accompanied by Mulder, who knew the shortcuts that would bypass most of the security checkpoints. Skinner, assured that the crisis was over, offered to procure a cup of soup from the nearest vending machine for Scully before he left. Surprised by the concern from someone who was as much of a stickler for maintaining professional distance as she was, and had made it obvious days ago that her vampiric condition unnerved him greatly. Scully accepted his suggestion with thanks, and watched him exit the room, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"You're lucky that you have so many people you can trust this much," Nick commented, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside her.

Scully did not have the strength to laugh out loud, but she was able to manage a wry cough. "Apart from my mother...you've met them all, and she...didn't know about...this."

"And would you have told her, if this hadn't worked?"

Presuming this is the cure, and not a forced remission... she thought in a flash of cold objectivity, but determined that an optimistic outlook was best for all concerned, especially the man sitting next to her. "I don't know. I hope I would be able to. She is, after all, family." Nick's pensive silence made her suspect that more than polite curiosity sparked his question. "Did you tell anyone in your family?"

"No," he replied, a little too sharply. Then, realizing that she had noticed, added a calmer "but my sister figured it out somehow. Back then, disease of any sort was considered

God's curse on the impious, and an existence like this, well...I couldn't bring that under my family's roof and expect them to accept it." He reached for the slight rise of the blanket where her hand rested and gave it a light squeeze, feeling the warmth of mortal blood through the cloth. "Of course, these days, I don't think being committed to a mental institution or becoming a guinea pig for some scientist's immortality research is much of a trade-off." He saw her wince and nod as she closed her eyes, and decided that he should get out what he had intended to say since the beginning of the treatment before she fell asleep. "Dana, I just wanted you to know how grateful I am for what you went through tonight. I understand that you did this for your own sake, to regain your normal life, but what it means to me and those who want to go back is more than I can express in mere words. Not even I could predict what would happen once the injection took effect, and I've been through my share of treatments. To venture into the unknown like that required more courage than I would have been capable of."

Glazed blue eyes opened to focus---almost---on him, and her words came louder than before, indicating a return of strength. "I don't know if it was courage, Nick, or simply that the hope of success was greater than acceptance of the condition." A weary smile. "Or maybe it was just plain obstinance."

"Whatever you want to call it, I appreciate what you did," he insisted, uncovering her hand long enough to plant a chivalric kiss on the knuckles. The look of bemused embarrassment on her face warned him that he had overstepped some boundary, and he defused the incident with a half-joking "Think of it, then, as the scene when Tinkerbelle drank the poison to keep it from Peter Pan. She did it because there was no other way. In a sense, the nickname seems to fit you better than I thought."

She managed an audible chuckle. "'Clap hands if you believe in fairies,'" she wheezed.

As Skinner approached the interview rooms with a styrofoam cup of watery chicken noodle soup, he heard the sound of male laughter and slow applause.

Quonochontaug, Rhode Island—
July 1; 5:30 A.M.

"Ready?" Mulder asked, picking up his cell-phone on the way to the back door.

"No, but yes," was Scully's reply. She eyed the faded blue of false dawn beginning to lighten, giving way to true sunrise, and knew that she had to take the first step today. In the week since her first treatment, she had been exposing herself gradually to brief periods of sunlight at the end of the day. This would be her first attempt at an increasing dosage of UV radiation, and her memories of being burned were still fresh. *But now that the organism is under control, I have to give my human metabolism a chance to rebuild on its own, and not assert itself only when the vampire is too weak.*

Constant monitoring and frequent small doses of the "vaccine" kept her from regressing and prevented another occurrence of that first night, and she had regained her appetite for everyday food. Walking in full daylight would be the final hurdle, and she had both feared and looked forward to it. The choice of location for the test had been Mulder's, since his family's summer cabin gave her the isolation she had needed these past few days to continue the injections and sunlight acclimation without worrying about the neighbors. She was the lone occupant, with Mulder taking up residence in the area motel "just in case." *We both know I'm past the point where the need and the blood-bond would be a problem, but I can't blame him for wanting to avoid his old*

ghosts right now.

They stood in the back yard; she was several yards from the lake's edge, while he hovered around the deck. The double doors remained open in the event she had to make an emergency dash for cover. She slipped on a pair of sunglasses with ultraviolet-blocking lenses and waited, a mixture of dread and anticipation making her heart pound. *Nice to be able to hear just my own heart beat, instead of someone else's from across the room.*

A slap of hand against flesh made her turn and glance behind.

"Mosquito," Mulder explained, dusting the insect's corpse onto his jeans. "This time of year, they're almost as bad as the ones in D.C.." He watched her stand there, seemingly unaffected by the hungry creatures, and added, "You're closer to the lake, but they don't look like they're bothering you. Are they?"

"No." She was about to shrug off the observation, having no automatic theory for it, when one presented itself, one that was too good to pass up. Facing the lake again, she pushed the glasses further up her nose and said, "Maybe it's professional courtesy."

She could almost hear his brows arch in surprise, but the typical Fox Mulder cough that translated into a startled laugh was a more substantial response. *Joking about it before was just a coping mechanism,* she reflected, seeing the sky pale even further, *but now it's a way of putting the whole thing behind us, moving through it back to normality.* It was heartening to realize that she had to see the light increase to know that dawn was coming, and not be able to feel it like a shift in her internal clock. *Almost there...once I conquer the sun, I will be human again.*

The first flash of the sun over the trees forced a gasp from her, and her whole body tensed, planting her feet

against the memory of being seared. Warmth touched the skin on her face, then moved into the deeper layers as light crept down to her neck and forearms. She drank in the heat like a sponge and felt the coolness she had come to associate with the vampire shrivel and melt. Tilting her head back and extending her arms a foot from her sides, she let the sensation cascade through her flesh and pour into her bones.

An eternity of seconds elapsed, then the warmth became a chill that she recognized as the false cold signal sent to the brain from bare feet on scorching sand. *Now, go in now...* Deliberately, fighting the instinct to bolt for the house, she pivoted on one heel with military precision and strode up the slight rise to the deck. Pain overrode dignity at that point, and she ran the rest of the way.

Mulder noted the time of exposure and, as he dialed the Toronto coroner's office, announced in a loud voice, "Five minutes, eight seconds. You beat your sunset record by fifteen." A voice on the line interrupted additional comment. "Dr. Lambert, please...Nat, Fox Mulder..."

Scully dropped into a kitchen chair, hissing when her arm bumped the table edge. The windows had been covered the night before, making it her "retreat room" for the tests, and she was grateful she had had the foresight to include the sunglasses, since she doubted that she would have reached her safe place quickly enough in a burned, half-blinded state. She gave herself a minute to allow the pain to subside, then got up and went to the sink.

Mulder walked in as she gently applied a dishtowel soaked in cool water to her skin. "Natalie says 'congratulations', and to call her with the details when you're feeling better." She nodded acknowledgement, wincing at the cloth's rough texture on her neck. "So, how is it?

"A little parboiled, but I'll live. Are you sure the stores were out of sunburn spray?"

"It was on back order at both places, but I got you something else that'll work." He pulled a bottle of apple cider vinegar and a box of cotton balls from the grocery sack he had brought in that morning. "Mom used to use it on us when we overdid. Also, Wheeler in Graphology swears by this." A bottle of vitamin E capsules joined the vinegar and cotton.

"Good, those should help. Thank you. The needle marks aren't healing as rapidly as they did, which is a sign of progress, but I'd rather have as much of the blistering gone as possible before I try again."

Mulder's head bobbed once, and he fought a yawn and lost. "Anything for tonight?"

"No, I'll be fine. Go to bed, Mulder, " she ordered, the tone in her voice giving his surname the old familiarity.

"On my way," he assured her, picking up the bottle of iced tea he had brought with him and polished off the last of it. As he moved to the wastebasket to throw it away, he heard a sharp crack of skin swatting skin, and he looked up at the sound.

"Ouch!" Scully yelped, staring at the thin smear of her own blood striping the back of her hand. "Missed. You weren't kidding about these..." The word "mosquitoes" died in her throat when she realized the significance of the bite, and she glanced at her partner to see if he had made the connection.

"So much for 'professional courtesy'," Mulder quipped dryly, then lifted the empty bottle in a toast and added a more sincere "Welcome back."

Annapolis, Maryland—August 6; 11:21 P.M.

E-mail message

To: Natalie Lambert
From: Dana Scully

Below you'll find a progress report detailing my recent dosage change and its results. Since last week, I have not only reduced the frequency, but also the method of administering the vaccine: a gauze bandage impregnated with the solution and worn for a two hour period four times a day, like a transdermal patch. As you will notice, the active organism count per c.c. fluctuated briefly, then continued its slow but steady decrease. The inactive count has grown proportionately, but beyond the initial destruction of some of the active viruses by the hybrids that first day, I have noticed no further "deaths". Since the virus needs a hospitable environment and blood to survive and reproduce, I believe it will be a matter of time before the dormant organisms cease to exist. This dormant state was an unexpected surprise, but it would explain the stories of victims who survived a single serious attack or group of attacks, lived for some time afterward, then "died" and became a vampire. Not all of the proto-organisms die off, it seems. I'll have a more coherent theory on this in the near future.

As of today, I am up to six cumulative hours of sun exposure, although I have not yet given up the sunglasses. Mulder, for the most part, has continued as if nothing

ever happened, although he will ask about my progress when we're alone, and he keeps track of my time outside despite my requests to leave that responsibility to me. A.D. Skinner maintains his usual official facade, but I get the feeling that he will never see me the same way again.

That, however, will soon be no concern of mine.

On to more pleasant topics. As I write this, I am making use of one of the gift certificates you sent me. Natural vanilla ice cream with plain cookie dough, vanilla chips and yogurt-covered almond bits, in case you're wondering. Glad to hear that the stuffed moose and squirrel arrived quickly. I don't know if I should take it personally that Sydney has decided the squirrel is his new chew toy. Is that considered a compliment in cat language?

Mulder was a little surprised by the author-autographed copy of Man and His Symbols from Nick. I assured him that a "thank-you" card would suffice, but when he learned I had planned to reciprocate Nick's gift of the Tinkerbelle pin with a tiebar decorated with a Taoist Yin/Yang symbol(I hope that, given its inclusive nature, it won't hurt him.), he insisted on finding something. That particular brand of sunscreen worked well for me and when we find a way to adapt my vaccine to fit Nick, he'll make good use of it. Re: your present, he understood the meaning of the helium balloons(which he explained to me, and his reason for sending you the teapot and sampler pack), but the moose antler cap attached to them was a complete mystery.

I let him think it was a Canadian reference.

You, Dr. Lambert, have an evil sense of humor.

I find it fascinating, after rereading the above paragraph, that while such an exchange might seem unduly intimate for recent acquaintances, I believe we have simultaneously decided that the positive discoveries and pleasant experiences of that first week were worth commemorating in some way. Those days had not been easy for any of us, but the fact that we chose to remember them says something for their significance.

Now that my time as a vampire is drawing to a close, I feel I can now answer the question you asked the other night at the airport. Even with the alternatives to hunting and the 24-hour culture we live in that would allow me to function away from the daylight, I do not regret choosing to become human again. Nick's long-term experience with death and fear would incline him to seek freedom from that cycle. Soares' and Ann Marie's deaths were acts of self-defense and defense of another's life, which, in the vampire world as I have been given to understand it, makes me something of an innocent.

This is a state, however, I know I could not maintain, not with the risks I am exposed to in my job and the fact that I have fed on my partner. Neither my secret nor his life would be safe for long. The vampire's need and instinct for survival is too great to deny or compromise with. I do not speak from centuries of avoidance and

guilt over a poorly-made choice. I speak from specific observation and a full understanding of my limitations.

This is not to say that I won't miss the advantages. The heightened senses and instantaneous healing would be invaluable assets in the field, and the ability to glean truth or gain cooperation would simplify our jobs greatly. And flight. Oh, Natalie, I'll miss that most of all. Even hang-gliding would be a poor second to slipping "the surly bonds of earth" under my own power, riding the winds on thought alone. Such transcendence, such freedom, is the hardest to leave behind.

But the price is too high.

So I willingly return to the mortal realm, bound to gravity and frailer parameters, knowing that what I have brought back with me will affect how I experience the rest of my life.

For now, in my dreams, I can truly fly...

The End